

Making Ripples

by Amanda Bancroft

With cooing reminiscent of ocarina wind instruments in “My Neighbor Totoro,” and wing beats like a magical Pegasus whinnying into the dawn and dusk, Mourning Doves are enchanting. When they damage gardens, crops or make messes with their droppings, they’re often considered pests. In some cultures, a dove’s call can coax the rain to fall, an unusual appearance of a dove could mean someone’s soul has departed, and in the Bible, Noah releases a dove which returns with an olive branch.

Mourning Doves (also called Turtle Doves or rain doves) are just one of about fifteen species of doves in North America. *Zenaida macroura* gets its common name from the mourning sound of its call, and the genus name from Napoleon’s daughter, Princess Zénaïde Bonaparte, who married the ornithologist who named the dove after her. “Macroura” comes from Ancient Greek, meaning “large tail.”

These doves typically weigh four to six ounces and are strong fliers, reaching speeds of up to 55mph! With a large range, they cover the continental United States. They can survive almost anywhere except swamps and deep forest. Commonly found in urban and rural areas alike, they prefer open spaces. A dove’s call can be mistaken for an owl. Don’t be confused by the high-pitched squeaky sound of their wings, which is most audible during take-off and landing.

They are like rabbits of the skies, breeding prolifically to feed both predators and hunters with up to six broods per year in southern climates. Monogamous mourning doves pair up with the same mates at the same locations each year, with a courtship dance, nest building and preening. Both parents incubate their two eggs – males take the morning shift, females work afternoons and nights! Incubation lasts two weeks, and the hatched young (called “squabs,” isn’t that wonderful?) are fed not worms but crop milk followed by an introduction to seeds, which the doves feed on almost exclusively. They’ll eat corn and other crop seeds, but also help farmers or gardeners by eating weed seeds, too. This vegetarian diet isn’t good for cowbirds, which rarely parasitize dove nests. Hawks and birds of prey are common predators, but many animals consume dove eggs and young.

Not even invasive doves seem to be able to reduce Mourning Dove populations, at least as far as current studies by the Cornell Lab of Ornithology demonstrate. In what reads like a novel, Eurasian Collared-Doves escaped during a 1970’s pet shop robbery in the Bahamas. Youths broke in looking for parakeets, but accidentally set doves free from the aviary. The discouraged pet shop owner gave up on his breeding program and released the remaining doves afterwards. The threat of a volcanic eruption on the island of Guadeloupe helped more released birds spread to Florida, where they were first found near Miami in 1982. They were noticed in Harrison, Arkansas in 1989, according to the Arkansas Audubon Society. Since Eurasian Collared-Doves are not native, they’re not protected (like Mourning Doves are) by the Migratory Bird Treaty Act, so as long as you hunt during dove season and can tell the two species apart, there are no bag limits for this exotic. The collared-doves have had no ill effect on other dove populations.

Hope, death, love, droppings...our relationship with Mourning Doves can be ambiguous. Science can part the curtain of mysticism surrounding the unknown. Still, when observing these pudgy-bodied, tiny-headed beauties with dark eyes ringed in light aqua, it's ok to squeal with unscientific glee for a puffy pal at the feeder!

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