Dove Fields for Everyone

A behind-the-scenes look at how the Commission manages more than 1,500 acres of public dove fields

written by Mike Zlotnicki
photographed by Thomas Harvey
Ben Solomon is also a fan of the dove fields. In addition to frequenting public land for hunting, his job at the Commission is to acquire land for the Game Lands Program across the state.

“Dove hunting on game lands is one of the Commission’s most utilized activities and one of the most sought after outdoor recreational opportunities that our game lands offer,” said Solomon, the Commission’s land acquisition manager and assistant chief of the Land and Water Access Division. “Game land dove fields are hugely beneficial for anyone seeking excellent dove hunting opportunities or looking to introduce someone to hunting.”

The Commission manages over 1,500 acres of dove fields on game lands across the state, enhancing opportunities for hunters to pursue mourning doves, the most popular and widely distributed game bird in North America. These fields benefit other wildlife as well.

“Most fields have borders where native vegetation is left fallow, and some have hedgerows of soft mast-producing trees and shrubs such as black cherry, persimmon, and Chickasaw plum,” Solomon said. “These areas provide excellent food and cover for many wildlife species while also providing cover for dove hunters.”

The Commission continues to improve and expand dove hunting opportunities on game lands. Solomon noted that a disabled sportsman dove hunting blind was recently completed on Suggs Mill Pond Game Land and more dove fields are being added as the Commission continues to acquire tracts of land with existing agriculture fields.

“Dove hunting is a great way to introduce hunting to a new hunter because it doesn’t require any special gear or equipment,” he added. “All you need is a hunting license, shotgun with shells and a game land dove field!”

The ABCs of Dove Fields

To get a little “boots on the ground” information, I met with Jordan Depot Team Leader Derek Stamey at the Sexton Road Dove Field. We parked our trucks at the parking area, walked around the gate and talked about dove fields as we ambled down the path toward Jordan Lake. As a fan of the results but ignorant of the process, I asked him about the basics of managing dove fields.

“Well, the first thing we do is plant corn and milo,” Stamey said. “Second week of April as soon as we get done with corn, we hit the milo. They have roughly the same maturity rate. The next one we get to is sunflowers in early May and then millets, depending upon what varieties we’re planting. German golden millet takes the longest to mature, so you plant that about the same time you plant sunflowers. Here at Jordan, we plant German golden foxtail millet, brown top millet and sometimes we throw some proso millet in the mix.”

Stamey said one of the obstacles in managing dove fields is land that hasn’t been “farmed to death.” The staff also uses experience in knowing that some fields simply produce a certain crop or crops better than others.

“A lot of the fields we have here are historical farm fields and a bunch of the nutrients have been taken out of them,” Stamey said. “You need soil that drains well. We do fertilize.”

Stamey said that they try to conduct soil tests about every three years and try to get a prescription fertilizer and a lime application for the fields.
Deer depredation can also be a big problem when growing dove fields. “You can have the prettiest field of sunflowers and when they get about 8 inches tall, deer will come and just mow ‘em down. Then you go to your backup crop, buckwheat,” he said. “We throw in some sunflower seed into our food plot mix for early season bow hunters. They’re not going to persist through the winter but will help with that early season archery opportunity.”

This begs the question of what other opportunities do dove fields offer. A couple of years ago I was walking down the same road where Stamey and I were talking. I had my two German shorthaired pointers with me to hunt woodcock on the low land near the lake and around a bend came three generations of rabbit hunters and a pack of 10 or so beagles. On another occasion, I ventured to Butner to hunt those dove fields in early fall. After walking a field edge about 100 yards, I heard a whistle above me. There above me was a bow hunter in full camouflage. I backtracked immediately.

“We have a pretty good edge habitat on some of our dove fields,” Stamey said as a mourning dove flapped its wings behind him. “Turkey hunters and deer hunters primarily use the dove fields, besides dove hunters. We do cover crops in the winter, like crimson clover and winter wheat. During the springtime, that provides great foraging opportunities for wild turkeys.”

Stamey and I talked deer hunting for a while, and I learned that he’s a proficient bowhunter who harvests his deer from the game lands that he manages. I also learned about the other duties his staff performs other than dove field management.

“We have about 100 acres of fields we plant at Jordan,” he said. “In addition to dove fields, wildlife technicians do prescribed burns, maintain boat ramps and public fishing areas, manage timber, maintain lake buoys, mark boundaries. There are only four technicians at Jordan Depot, managing the 65,000 acres, including the water in Jordan, Harris, Chatham and Lee game lands. And we have seven waterfowl impoundments on Jordan that we flood every other year.”

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