



Dove Natural History

Mourning dove

Mourning doves occur from the lowest elevations along the Colorado River upward through forests of ponderosa pines to 8,500 feet. Their staple foods throughout the year are primarily small seeds and cultivated grains. Although some doves can be found nesting on the ground in open prairies, the best nesting habitats are brushlands and woodlands within the Sonoran Desert. Here, the woeful call of breeding males can be heard as early as February, and pairs have been known to attempt as many as seven nestings in a single season. Productivity may therefore be high even though the usual clutch size is only two eggs. Incubation takes only about 15 days, and is accomplished by both parents, as is the brooding and feeding of the nearly naked squabs. The young doves are fed regurgitated "pigeon milk" by both parents, and they grow and develop rapidly. Fledglings leave the nest only 12 to 14 days after hatching. Even in southern Arizona, nesting is essentially over by mid-August, and some of the early-hatched juveniles have already migrated by late July. By the first week of September, the migration of most nesting populations is usually underway, the juveniles typically leaving before the adults.

White-winged dove

There are two types of white-winged dove populations in Arizona, a thinly scattered population found throughout the Sonoran Desert and the surrounding countryside (including towns and residential neighborhoods), and colonial populations that nest collectively along river bottoms adjacent to agricultural areas. Most of the desert and residential area whitewings nest only once and migrate out of the state prior to the opening of the dove season on September 1.



The colonial whitewings, however, usually nest twice before departing for their wintering areas in southwestern Mexico. These are the whitewings that are most often present after September 1, and which contribute most to the harvest. Males of both populations begin courtship as soon as they arrive in Arizona in late April and early May. By late May, nesting is at its peak, both sexes sharing in the incubation of the eggs and the feeding and brooding of the two young squabs, most of which hatch toward the end of June. Fed a highly nutritious “pigeon-milk” by their parents, the squabs are usually fledged by late June or July. Should grains or other high-energy foods be available, the colonial-nesting birds will now attempt another nesting, while the “desert birds” begin migrating south.

As the second nesting comes to a close in late July and August, both the juvenile birds and their parents form gregarious flocks in selected roost sites adjacent to favored feeding fields, which unlike those selected by mourning doves, are often composed of standing crops of barley, maize, and safflower. The stimuli for the mass migration from cultivated valleys that takes place about September 1 are not completely understood. Summer storms, a drop in nighttime temperatures, food shortages, and harassment by hunters have all been suggested as reasons for the movement. Nonetheless, there have been years when all of these events occurred with little or no influence on the onset of migration. Once migration is underway, the departure is often rapid, the adults usually leaving before the juveniles.

Collared dove

Eurasian collared doves

The Eurasian collared dove is an invasive species and a relative newcomer to North America and Arizona. In the 1970's a shipment of Eurasian collared doves was sent to an exotic bird dealer in the Bahamas in place of an order of Ringed Neck Turtle Doves (also known as the Barbary Dove). They were then accidentally released and quickly made their way to Florida by the mid 1980's. They grew in numbers, and then began making their way westward.

The Christmas Bird Counts performed annually by the Audubon Society place the first recorded sightings in Arizona at 2001. Since that time, their numbers have been steadily increasing and can be found in all areas of the state.

African collared doves

The African Collared Dove is an invasive species and has been in North America for quite some time, but in a different form. This species is the ancestral form of the Ringed Neck Turtle Dove, which is a domestic bird that has been held in captivity around the world by collectors and bird enthusiasts since its domestication 2000 to 3000 years ago. Those that escape or have been released typically do not persist in nature for long because they cannot distinguish natural food sources and have lost the instinctive predator avoidance mechanisms. They can however successfully breed with wild



populations of either Eurasians or Africans if they are present. The great increase in varieties and color variations in the 20th century was brought about by cross breeding with African Collared Doves. These wild type birds have also escaped and been released which is why they are here now.

The native habitat of the African Collared Dove is Sub-Saharan Africa which is not all that different than the desert Southwest. Theoretically, this means the spread and range of African Collared Doves should be limited to the Southwestern U.S. and not much further. Wild populations are currently known to be in Arizona and southern California.