

tips & quips  
about our  
environment  
and its  
inhabitants

## NATURE'S reflections

### MOURNING DOVE

*Its numbers are estimated to be 475 million*

The Mourning Dove (*Zenaidura macroura*), a member of the dove family (*Columbidae*), is one of the most abundant and widespread of all North American migratory birds and a year round resident of Florida. Five subspecies are all similar and named for the plaintive *coo-WHO-O coo-coo-coo* call.

It weighs four to six ounces and is about twelve inches long. The wings make a distinctive whistle when taking flight or landing. It is a strong flier, capable of speeds up to 55 mph. Plumage is a soft grey-brown color. It has perching feet, with three toes forward and one reversed; legs are short and reddish colored. Sexes are similar. Adults feed almost exclusively on seeds and frequent bird feeders for cracked-corn, millet, safflower and sunflower seeds on the ground. It does not dig or scratch for seeds, but eats what is readily visible.

Following a graceful but noisy courtship, the male leads the female to potential nest sites and she chooses one. The male gathers nesting material, then stands on her back and passes the material to her. She places the twigs, conifer needles, and grass blades to construct the nest. Occasionally a pair will refurbish a found nest. Doves usually nest in trees, five to twenty-five feet above ground. Here, two white eggs are laid and a two-week incubation begins. Unlike most birds, doves incubate their eggs continually. The male takes the daytime shift and the female does the night shift. Mourning doves are devoted parents and nests are very rarely left unattended.

The young squabs are helpless at hatching and covered with down. Doves produce a food called crop milk (not really milk) by glands in the crop of the adult birds. The parent opens its mouth wide, permitting the nestling to stick its head inside to feed on the nutritious food. Both parents feed the squabs crop milk for the first three to four days of life, then it is gradually augmented by seeds. Fledging takes place about two weeks after they are capable of digesting seeds. They continue to be fed for another two weeks.

As a gamebird, the Mourning Dove is well-managed, with up to 40-70 million taken by hunters each year. Its ability to sustain its population stems from its prolific breeding. In warm areas, one pair may raise up to six broods a year. The Mourning Dove can live up to 19 years, although most birds live one and a half to five years. 🌿

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