

Hunting Doves on Agricultural Lands in Missouri

Many hunters and landowners establish crops and manage habitats to create ideal conditions and locations to hunt mourning doves and provide food and cover for a variety of wildlife. Mourning doves are migratory birds, so they are protected under the federal Migratory Bird Treaty Act, which specifically prohibits baiting a field for the purpose of hunting (Figure 1).

Planting and managing fields using normal agricultural practices require careful planning and an understanding of the relevant regulations. This publication aims to help landowners understand baiting regulations and particularly the differences between baiting and what constitutes a normal agricultural operation in Missouri. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and the Missouri Department of Conservation (MDC) are empowered to enforce regulations governing baiting migratory birds. You can find more specific information about these regulations in the *Additional information* section.

Regulations

Title 50, Part 20.11 of the Code of Federal Regulations governs hunting of mourning doves and other migratory birds. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service has jurisdiction to enforce laws and regulations pertaining to the hunting of all migratory game birds. The regulation states that no person shall take migratory game birds "...by the aid of baiting on or over a baited area where a person knows or reasonably should know that the area is or has been baited."

What is baiting?

Under federal law, baiting is defined as "the direct or indirect placing, exposing, depositing, distributing, or scattering of salt, grain, or other feed that could serve as a lure or attraction for migratory game birds to, on, or over any areas where hunters are attempting to take them." Put simply, you cannot use food to bait doves to an area for the purpose of hunting. The presence of any grain or feed scattered or piled on the ground should alert a hunter or landowner that the area might be baited. It is also illegal to



Figure 1. Doves are migratory birds, which are protected by the Migratory Bird Treaty Act.

hunt doves over piled grain discarded from storage bins or livestock feeders.

An area is considered baited for 10 days after the bait has been completely removed, because doves might habitually return to the same area for several days after their food supply no longer exists. Hunting over a baited area is illegal for the duration of the 10-day period.

Agricultural and soil conservation practices

Dove hunting is allowed over lands where either a "normal agricultural operation" or "normal soil stabilization practice" has occurred. Federal regulations require that grains used to attract doves be planted as part of a normal agricultural operation and identify Cooperative Extension Service specialists as experts for determining what constitutes a normal agricultural operation or soil stabilization practice.

What is a normal agricultural operation?

For the purposes of the Migratory Bird Treaty Act, a normal agricultural operation is any normal planting, harvest, post-harvest manipulation or agricultural operation that produces and gathers a crop or prepares for next season's crop. In this case, manipulation is the alteration of natural vegetation or agricultural crops and residue through activities including but not limited to mowing, shredding, disking, rolling, chopping, trampling, flattening, burning and treating an area with herbicide. These practices can legally be conducted to establish or

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improve habitats for doves if they are performed on a normal agriculture operation and conducted in accordance with crop production and management recommendations developed by MU Extension. (See the *Additional information* section for information on crop production recommendations for managing fields for doves.) The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service makes final determinations about whether recommendations were followed.

What is a normal soil stabilization practice?

A normal soil stabilization practice is any planting made for controlling soil erosion for agricultural purposes or post-mining land reclamation. Hunters can legally hunt in areas that are planted as part of a normal soil stabilization practice for agricultural purposes, such as for erosion control or for establishment of a cover crop. Establishing wheat, rye or oats by broadcast seeding as a cover crop to control erosion might be a good soil stewardship practice, but you should contact an MDC conservation agent or a U.S. Fish and Wildlife agent to check that this would not be considered baiting prior to hunting. Use of naturally occurring vegetation is encouraged for stabilizing embankments and controlling soil erosion, and also because hunting over natural vegetation is not considered baiting.

Dove field management

Refer to the planting, manipulation and harvest recommendations for the crop you plan to establish before planting a field for doves. Landowners have several options for developing good habitat for doves. See MU Extension publication G9416, *Ecology and Management of Mourning Doves in Missouri*, for information on crops and management practices that improve habitats and provide food sources.

Natural vegetation and crops — such as millet, sunflowers, grain sorghum, corn, winter wheat and buckwheat — can be grown and manipulated to improve dove-hunting opportunities. The seed of any crop should be planted at the recommended rate and planting dates and distributed evenly throughout the field. For example, wheat planted as a grain crop or as a cool-season forage would not be planted in concentrated piles or long rows of exposed seed, which would not be considered a normal agricultural planting.

After a grain crop has matured and prior to dove season, standing crops can be manipulated to make the area suitable for doves, provided these measures are taken as part of a normal agricultural operation. Manipulation of crops or natural vegetation is an effective means of improving dove-hunting opportunities. Food scattered by harvesting a crop can also benefit many other species of wildlife.

Where is it legal to hunt doves?

- Areas where seeds or grains have been scattered as a result of a normal agricultural operation or soil stabilization practice.

- Areas where seeds or grains have been scattered solely as a result of normal agricultural operations, which include normal agricultural harvestings, post-harvest manipulations and practices
- Over standing crops
- Over standing or manipulated natural vegetation, such as a fallow crop field
- Over “hogged-down” fields where livestock have fed on standing crops
- Over feedlots
- From a blind camouflaged with natural vegetation
- From a blind camouflaged with vegetation from agricultural crops, provided grains or other feed from the crop is not exposed or scattered, which would count as a baited area

Responsibilities of the hunter

The hunter must determine whether a field is baited and address the following points before a hunt to ensure it is legal:

- Familiarize yourself with federal and state regulations on hunting migratory game birds.
- Ask the landowner, host or hunting guide if the area has been baited.
- Be vigilant for doves congregating or feeding in one specific area or displaying a lack of caution. This might indicate the area has been baited.
- Look closely for grain or other feed in the area that looks like it might have been intentionally placed or gathered and not as part of a normal agricultural operation.
- Familiarize yourself with the recommended planting, harvesting and other agricultural practices for crops in your area.
- Abandon the hunt if you find grain or feed in an area and are uncertain about the reasons for it being there.

Safety in dove hunting

Safety is an important consideration for any enjoyable hunting experience. Failing to follow safety recommendations might result in you receiving a citation for a safety violation or being shot by another hunter. Follow these simple rules to help the hunt go smoothly and ensure a safe experience:

- Stay at least 100 yards away from other hunters.
- Never shoot at low flying birds or birds on the ground, as the chances of shooting a fellow hunter are higher.
- All hunters should wear protective glasses.
- Never allow anyone in the field to drink alcohol.

Conclusion

Always check current federal, state and local laws before manipulating and hunting fields for doves. If you have questions about regulations governing dove hunting

or baiting in Missouri, refer to the resources listed in *Additional information* and contact the MDC or the local U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Office of Law Enforcement. You can also consult your local MU Extension office for information on crop production and management practices that apply to your area of the state.

Additional information

These resources provide detailed information on specific issues related to the management and hunting of game bird populations.

- Missouri Department of Conservation: <http://mdc.mo.gov/> and <http://huntfish.mdc.mo.gov/hunting-trapping/species/dove>
- U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, dove hunting and baiting regulations: <http://www.fws.gov/le/dove-hunting-and-baiting.html>

ALSO FROM MU EXTENSION PUBLICATIONS

- G4161 *Cover Crops in Missouri: Putting Them to Work on Your Farm*
- G4306 *Buckwheat: A Multi-Purpose, Short-Season Alternative*
- G4652 *Seeding Rates, Dates and Depths for Common Missouri Forages*
- G9416 *Ecology and Management of Mourning Doves in Missouri*

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