

Dove Season Opener Gets Closer

by Lee Keck

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Sporting a broad smile on his face, my long-time dove hunting companion Mark Hubbard trotted across the parched sunflower field to retrieve his hard-earned prize. Though it was his first dove of the season, it had not come with the first shot from his 20 gauge over-and-under.

In fact, the Springfield area hunter had expended several shotgun shells before zeroing in on the tiny gray mourners flying just barely within range of our hiding spot. Though this hunt occurred more than a decade ago, I still remember his smile indicating he had finally discovered the appropriate lead required to bag a few of the fast-flying targets.

That particular dove opener had brought us to one of the Illinois Department of Natural Resources' public hunting areas at the Jim Edgar Panther Creek State Fish and Wildlife Area (formerly Site M). Though biologists rated the condition of the sunflower fields less than ideal, it appeared that a fair number of doves were utilizing the fields.

"Here comes another bunch," warned Hubbard as he crouched behind a thick clump of weeds. "These birds are headed right over your head."

Though the warning came in ample time, the two shots fired from my 12-gauge scattergun failed to ruffle a single feather.

Unsuccessfully trying to contain his sheepish grin, my hunting partner pointed out that I obviously still needed to make a few adjustments to my aim. The growing pile of empty shells at my feet gave further testimony to his statements.

With more than four dozen dove openers to my credit, I've come to realize that whoever first called doves the bird of peace was obviously not a hunter.

After years of mourning dove research, I've discovered a few interesting facts about these so-called peace-loving creatures. For one, I can now say with some authority that these birds possess something of a mean streak.

Most any dove enthusiast will readily admit that mourners have the unique ability to anticipate a hunter's every move. Without exception, these tiny supersonic targets soar whenever a hunter expects them to dive. Likewise, they inevitably swing each time we expect them to sway.

It's enough to frustrate the most ardent wingshooter. No wonder so many dove hunters develop an uncontrollable flinch by the conclusion of the season.

Following a fair amount of teasing from my hunting partner, I regrouped and prepared for the next shooting opportunity.

Using a highly sophisticated mathematical formula, I carefully re-calculated the appropriate lead. I also adjusted my aim just in case the crafty creature decided to do a mid-air flip. If this failed, I would surely bag the bird on the second shot. Instead, however, the next shot missed when the bird flopped and entered a sharp dive.

Moments later my partner gleefully announced I had again shot behind the bird. Thanking him in my own way, I remained calm and continued with the day's hunt. Unfortunately, things did not improve.

After more than 50 shooting opportunities this day, I cannot recall facing the same situation more than once. And, following nearly every missed shot, my hunting partner willingly shared some bit of shooting advice.

It proved to be another typical dove opener. Along with a virtually unscathed dove population, I dealt with hungry mosquitoes, angry wasps and plenty of criticism. And, all this leads me to one more conclusion about dove hunting.

Sympathy is about the only thing you won't receive in the dove field!

Despite the many challenges involved, dove hunting remains among my favorite outdoor pursuits. Like so many sportsmen who consider the annual opener an unofficial holiday, I anxiously look forward to the hunt each year.

The annual September 1 dove opener usually finds weather conditions more like the dog days of August than the beginning of the autumn.

Dusty whirlwinds whipping across the dry stubble fields burn the eyes and leave one's mouth longing for a cool, wet refreshment. Various types of stinging insects seem to zero in on any living being venturing into the fields.

But, opening day also traditionally brings the greatest concentrations of doves to these popular gunning grounds. And, this almost always means the very best dove hunting of the entire 90-day season.

Visit any popular dove hunting field on opening day and you'll soon discover why these tiny gray rockets have become Illinois' most popular gamebird.

As in the past, this year's dove season is split into two segments. Illinois hunters have a split season opening Sept. 1 and running approximately 75 days. The season then reopens the day after Christmas and runs the remainder of the 90 days.

Attachments area