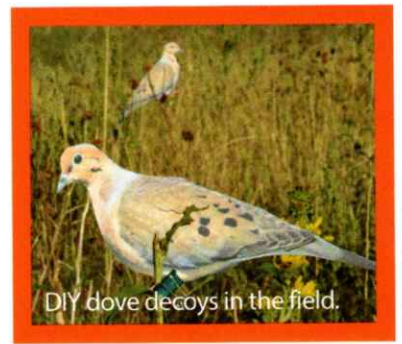


Mourning dove



DIY dove decoys in the field.

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## MAKE YOUR OWN DOVE DECOYS

### Materials:

- Color computer printer
- White printer paper
- Scissors or X-acto knife
- Glue
- Spray lacquer
- Heavyweight manila file folders
- Binder clips (paper clamps)

Print out the decoy image (or print out the one on this page), either mourning dove or Eurasian collared dove depending on the bird you're targeting. Spread glue across the back of the decoy image, then fold it over one thickness of a file folder. After the glue dries, cut along the outline of the bird. Spray one side with lacquer. After the lacquer dries, spray the other side, and allow it to dry. You'll need at least six decoys. A dozen is better. Use binder clips to attach the decoys to barbwire, a branch or a sturdy stalk. Find more decoys at [coloradooutdoorsmag.com/2013/08/26/diy-dove-decoys/](http://coloradooutdoorsmag.com/2013/08/26/diy-dove-decoys/)

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# Decoying Doves

By LISA BALLARD

## It was an unusual way to prepare for a hunt.

My husband, Jack, was in our home office. The printer whirred. A few minutes later, he emerged with the printouts, glue, scissors and manila folders, and headed to the kitchen. My stepdaughter, Zoe, who loves anything to do with arts and crafts, joined him at the counter.

“What are you making?” I asked, looking over his shoulder at a dozen life-size copies of mourning doves. Each picture showed two sides of a dove, to be folded down the middle. The rendition was near perfect, a plump-bodied bird slightly bigger than a robin, with a long, pointed tail, short, bare legs and a smallish head compared to its body. Its plumage was buffy brown with black spots on its folded wing and a blue ring around its eyes.

“I’m making dove decoys,” answered Jack, ever the do-it-yourself-er. “Tomorrow is opening day.”

DIY dove decoys in the field.



**DIY Decoys.** The thought of dove hunting excited and intimidated me. I had tried it once before, several years earlier at a friend's invitation. We sat among stalks of cultivated sunflowers on the edge of a fallow field. The idea was to shoot the birds as they crossed the open dirt en route from their roosts to the sunflowers. Doves feed almost entirely on seeds. Sunflowers, both cultivated and wild, are among their favorites.

Dozens of birds winged toward us in waves. They were fast, and instead of coming directly into the sunflowers, they swooped and arced like Blue Angels on steroids. The more experienced dove hunters in our small group eventually got their limit. Though I emptied a couple boxes of shells, I bagged only two birds.

"This is going to be different," promised Jack. "We'll set up in a field of wild sunflowers and use these decoys."

Paper decoys? My only experience with using decoys was waterfowling, and those were much sturdier, molded plastic.

I watched as Jack and Zoe folded the dove pictures in half over pieces of manila folder and then trimmed them to shape. "I hope it's a calm day," I said, skeptically, as Jack slid the finished decoys into a folder to protect them.

When all of the paper decoys were safely in the folder, Jack scrounged around the kitchen floor for one of our dog's tennis balls, then pulled a package containing frozen, feathered dove parts from the freezer that he kept for training our dog to retrieve. Using a few wooden skewers and some zip-ties, Jack attached a head, two wings and a tail, all a bit ragged from too much time in a dog's mouth and the freezer, to the tennis ball. The wings and tail were spread as if the bird were about to land.

"Meet, Fred, the robo-dove," declared Jack, showing off his creation. In theory, Fred would flutter in a light breeze.

"You mean Franken-dove," countered Zoe, sarcastically.

**Hunting Doves.** The next morning, the three of us walked through some shrubs, then broke out onto a patch of rolling prairie-land heading toward the sunflowers where Jack wanted to set up. In the distance, a couple of granaries crowned the edge of a wheatfield. Between us and the wheatfield lay a quarter mile of wild oats and grasses, all of which looked delightfully dove-y.

Mourning doves can live almost anywhere that's not heavily forested or swampy, including urban and suburban areas. However, they love grasslands and farmlands, where seeds are plentiful from three possible sources — wild, cultivated and from spilled

silage — and where there's open woods or shelter belts for roosting. They need a water source, like a stream or a stock tank, which they prefer in the open so they can see predators approach. They also need a source of gravel, which they ingest to aid in the digestion of the seeds they eat.

On Jack's cue, we set up our stools amidst the sunflowers, which were intermixed with wild oats, another dove favorite. Then we quickly got to work clipping the paper decoys to random sunflower stalks and a barbed-wire fence. Fred "flew" alone, on top of a 4-foot metal rod.

Once the decoys were set, we sat on our stools, which were in a line about 30 yards from the fence, beyond which stood a stock tank. It was a perfect set up, with perching spots (the barbed-wire fence), water (the stream behind and the stock tank in front), and a few acres of wild sunflowers and oats. The wind was calm. The decoys looked like happy doves resting after gorging on seeds, but Fred, well, he had issues.

Our Franken-dove appeared unclear on the concept of flying. One wingtip pointed straight down and the other straight up. Jack fixed Fred, but then Fred rolled on his back.



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## MOURNING DOVE VERSUS EURASIAN COLLARED-DOVE

The first Eurasian collared-doves (ECDs) flew to the U.S. mainland in the 1970s after escaping from a pet store in the Bahamas and are now common throughout the southeastern, central and western United States. ECDs were first spotted in Colorado in Otero County in 1996. Since then, they've spread to all 64 counties in the state and are considered an invasive species. They don't migrate, though they will disperse as their population grows.

Mourning doves, a native Colorado gamebird, can also be found in every county in Colorado. Some stay year-round, though most migrate south after the first cold snap in the early fall. Likewise, those breeding in Canada and northern parts of the United States, including Montana, Wyoming and the Dakotas, migrate south for the winter through Colorado, creating plentiful hunting opportunities.

**Know your doves!** ECDs and mourning doves look different, sound different and have different hunting regulations:

**Looks.** ECDs have a distinctive dark band, or "collar," that wraps around the backs of their necks. They are larger than mourning doves, and their tails are square rather than pointed. Mourning doves have a distinctive blue ring around their eyes and black "spots" on their folded wings.

**Sounds.** Mourning doves make a mournful, soothing cooing sound, whereas an ECD's coo is harsher and more clipped.

**Hunting Seasons:** In Colorado, mourning dove (and white-winged dove) season typically opens September 1 and runs through late November. You must have a Colorado small-game license and a Harvest Information Program (HIP) number to hunt mourning doves.

It's open season on ECDs year-round. No hunting license required.

**Bag Limits:** For mourning doves, the bag limit is 15 per day, with a possession limit of 45. There's no bag limit or possession limit for ECDs. Note: ECDs must remain fully feathered in the field and while transporting them, or they will be counted toward your mourning dove bag limit.



Dove hunting is a great way to introduce others to hunting.



© JACK BALLARD



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## 10 TIPS TO HELP YOU BAG MORE DOVES

- 1. Go early in the season.** Migratory mourning doves continue south after Colorado's first cold snap.
- 2. Head to Eastern Colorado:** According to CPW's harvest surveys, the most doves are harvested east of the Continental Divide in Weld, Morgan, Adams, Arapahoe, Logan, Larimer, Yuma, Pueblo, Otero and Prowers counties.
- 3. Open your choke(s):** With a single-barrel shotgun, an improved or modified choke is preferable over a full choke. With a double-barrel shotgun, use an improved choke for your first shot and a modified choke for your second shot. The wider pattern increases the chances of hitting the bird and helps keep the breast meat intact.
- 4. Pick your pellet size.** Size 7 ½ and 8 shot is standard for dove hunting, though some hunters prefer larger size 5 or 6. Fewer but bigger pellets are less likely to damage the meat at close range and have more punch at longer distances.
- 5. Lead the bird!** Doves are fast, flying up to 55 miles per hour. On crossing shots, push your barrel ahead of the bird at least 1 inch for each foot of lead you need. For example, 6 inches between the bead and the bird equals 6 feet of lead at the bird itself, and that might not be enough.
- 6. Shoot sitting.** Most dove hunters sit, hidden from sight. Doves often appear without warning. Standing may make them flare before you get a shot. Practice shooting from a seated position on clay targets so you're proficient when it counts.
- 7. Pick a bird.** Doves often approach in groups. Pick one bird rather than "flock shooting," which rarely works.
- 8. Swing through the bird.** Doves fly erratically rather than in a straight line. Swing smoothly through the bird rather than trying to follow its acrobatic flight path with your gun barrel and keep your gun moving after you pull the trigger.
- 9. Set decoys.** There's no magical pattern. Spread them around in singles and pairs. You can also use your decoys to get a sense of distance to the birds. At 30 yards or less, your odds of success increase.
- 10. Sit still.** After opening morning, doves become wary and key as much on movement as on sight. You don't need to wear camo. Drab clothing will do\*. More importantly, the quieter you sit, the more likely you'll get a shot.

\*For safety afield, Colorado Parks and Wildlife suggests wearing a hunter-orange (or hunter pink) hat or an article of hunter-orange clothing to alert other hunters of your location.

Jack fixed him again, then his head fell off. Jack fixed him a third time, then a wing and his tail tilted to the right. Zoe and I giggled. Finally, Jack left Fred to his own self-destruction. Doves were coming!

Jack pivoted toward the incoming birds, keeping low. "Not yet," he murmured.

We watched a half-dozen doves fly toward us, setting their wings. Two cautious ones landed on the fence, but the rest came to us as if on cue. Moments later, Zoe and I each had downed a couple of doves.

"The decoys are working," I said, as we picked up our birds. "I'm a believer!"

We settled back onto our stools again, just as another small flock of doves decoyed into our patch of sunflowers. And so went the morning. No big flocks, but a few at a time. After an hour, we each had a half-dozen doves. Then, as the wind picked up, our paper decoys began to follow Fred's lead, tilting this way and that, falling onto their beaks or blowing off their perches.

As we got ready to head home, we reveled in our successful morning. Next time I hear the familiar coo of a mourning dove, I'll be excited rather than anxious for the chance to hunt this small, fleet gamebird. 🐦

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A regular contributor to Colorado Outdoors, **Lisa Ballard** is an award-winning freelance writer and photographer. She stores her shotguns in Red Lodge, Montana, but has hunted birds throughout the Rockies and New England for most of her adult life. [LisaBallardOutdoors.com](http://LisaBallardOutdoors.com).



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