

...Texas Dove Hunting

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Those hunters typically harvest about 5 million mourning doves and almost 2 million whitewings.

That's a lot of dove breasts that will be doctored up with bacon and jalapeno and charred over a mesquite grill.

Much like the whitewing population, Texas' public hunting program has grown exponentially during the past three decades, providing an outlet for dove hunters across the state to get their fix, and for cheap, too.

Kelly Edmiston, public hunting coordinator with TPWD, said there are now more than 100 public hunting "units" totaling tens of thousands of acres scattered across the state that can be accessed by those purchasing an Annual Public Hunting permit.

"Our public hunting program started in 1987, focusing mainly on walk-in hunting opportunities on wildlife management areas and even some state parks," Edmiston said. "We even leased land from timber companies for some public hunting and in 1988 TPWD formed a partnership with the Forest Service to lease more new areas for hunters."

Edmiston said that one particular game bird has helped provide a big draw each year: doves.

"In 1994, we started a pilot program for public hunters, focusing specifically on doves but also other small game species," Edmiston said. "TPWD went out and looked for landowners willing to lease tracts within a short drive from metropolitan areas. We used proceeds from the sale of the Annual Public Hunting permit, which at the time was \$35, to lease more lands from private landowners that could be used for dove hunting. I think that first year we had about 10 areas but it was the start of

something larger.

"All along, the public dove hunting we've offered has been geared toward urban hunters. Maybe it's that hunter who can get off work early and take their kids out dove hunting and help pass the tradition on. That first year was focused mostly on areas within that I-35 corridor in either the Austin or San Antonio areas. And while we wanted to find more areas to lease for hunting, we also were focused on showing landowners that leasing land for hunting was a good thing, something that's not intimidating."

Edmiston said that there are numerous benefits associated with the public hunting program, and not just for hunters.

"Today we have about 120 areas throughout the state that are leased for public hunting, still mostly on those major metro corridors," Edmiston said. "Every year, we send biologists into the field, looking for new areas and contacting landowners to inquire about leasing their land for small game hunting. That includes doves, but also quail, waterfowl and even pheasants up in the Rolling Plains and Panhandle.

"What landowners quickly learn is that leasing land for public hunting is a great way to supplement their incomes and efforts. We've got a lot of folks that may only offer dove hunting during the first split because they've got cattle to work or crops to plant during the rest of the year."

Because of the economic impact of dove hunting in Texas - estimated at roughly \$300 million annually - it's easy to be optimistic each fall about lies ahead.

"The public hunting program, especially for doves, also helps out the little communities in and around our public hunting areas," Edmiston said. "Many of those little towns and stores see a bunch of business come in the door in

September and October when all those dove hunters are out. That's good for them."

Edmiston noted there's a wealth of information available for hunters looking to maximize their efforts on public lands, perhaps even finding a spot that might not get as much hunting pressure.

"When you purchase an Annual Hunting Permit you will get a booklet (roughly 180 pages) that includes map of all the tract in the public hunting program, with

listings for species that can be hunted and when, and the regulations that each tract is under," Edmiston said. "There's also a digital version online on our website, which includes aerial maps of the areas, which can help provide a little more detail."

2020-21 Texas Dove Seasons

North Zone: Sept. 1 - Nov. 12, 2020 & Dec. 18, 2020 - Jan. 3, 2021

Central Zone: Sept. 1 - Nov. 1, 2020 & Dec. 18, 2020 - Jan. 14,

2021

Special White-winged Dove Days (entire South Zone): Sept. 5-6, 12-13 (special regulations apply)

South Zone, Regular Season: Sept. 14 - Nov. 1, 2020; Dec. 18, 2020 - Jan. 23, 2021

The daily bag limit for doves statewide is 15 and the possession limit 45.

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