

Conservation Corner

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January 25, 2017

Recently two lonely singers have been serenading us night and day from atop the ice-covered branches of the locust and cottonwood trees just south of our house. The nighttime performer, of course, is a great horned owl, while the daytime crooner is a mourning dove. As only about 2% of our mourning doves spend the winter here in Iowa, let's select the mourning dove for our first bird friend of 2017.



Zenoida macroura, commonly called the mourning or rain dove, is a member of the Columbiade family. It is one of the

most widespread and abundant birds in North America with over 350 million in the U.S. alone. Mourning doves are easy to identify with their plump bodies, long pointed tails, black-spotted wings, lamenting call, and distinctive flight pattern. Mourning doves are fast flyers, reaching speeds up to 55 mph. Their powerful wingbeats allow them to make sudden ascents, descents, and dodges accompanied by a distinctive wing whistle during take-offs and landings.

Mourning doves are ground foragers. They quickly swallow grass and weed seeds, storing them in their crops before flying to a perch to digest their meal in safety. The record number of seeds found in one crop is a mind-boggling 17,200 bluegrass seeds. As habitat generalists, mourning doves have coped well with settlement. Today their main threats include diurnal birds of prey and lead poisoning from fallen lead shot.

Like many birds, mourning doves form strong pair bonds. Both parents help in nest building as well as incubation and nursing duties. That's right, mourning doves feed their young a crop milk rich in protein and fat that looks like cottage cheese. The altricial squabs grow quickly and fledge at two weeks of age. Did you know the only other birds to feed their young milk are flamingoes and penguins?

Mourning doves are classified not as songbirds but as gamebirds. In 2011, Iowa became the 42nd state to establish a hunting season for mourning doves. The 70-day early fall season requires a small game license, habitat fee, and registration with the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Harvest Information Program.

Here's two more new facts I learned this week. Limited by their milk output, mourning doves lay only 2 eggs per clutch but may raise up to six broods per season, more than any other native bird. Mourning doves have been proposed as the host species for de-extinction projects involving the Passenger Pigeon, but recent DNA studies have shown they're not closely related after all.

In addition to many appearances throughout history as a symbol of love and peace, a dove is also found in the night sky. The constellation *Columba*, Latin for dove, lies just south of *Canis major*. To view and learn more about all the winter constellations, join us for Star Gazing with Conservation on Super Bowl Sunday, Feb. 5, from 3:00 to 4:30 p.m. We'll set up the digital star lab in the multi-purpose room at the Pocahontas Catholic School. Star-gazers of all ages are welcome!