

I enjoy hunting. Hunting is not anything like my passion; I am not a hardcore, high dollar hunter. But I do enjoy going out in pursuit of game. I do not consider myself a big game hunter, although I have taken an elk, but I am more like one of those casual outdoorsmen who goes out after feral hogs and waits in a stand for deer in the fall. While I do enjoy those types of hunting, dove hunting is my favorite.

Before I tell you why I like to take doves I should explain why I like to hunt at all. I have always been attracted to hunting. Even as a kid I would go after big skink lizards with my BB gun. But as I grew up I had neither the opportunity nor the money to go hunting and so the urge remained mostly dormant. It was not until I moved back to Texas late in 1990's that I began to have some opportunities to hunt. I was able to take two of my sons on deer hunts and we took several deer over the next few years.

Why do I hunt, beyond the strong instinct to bring meat back to my family? Primarily it is a shared outdoor experience. Part of the reason I hunt is because I feel an obligation to be part of the existing ecosystem. Men have always been hunters. We are part of the predatory portion of the wild. Without humans to remove some of the prey animals, nature's balance is disrupted. Moreover, to my mind, if you eat meat, you owe it to yourself (and the animal you are eating) to know where that meat comes from: a once living creature. I have no problem eating animals, but I feel obligated to at least periodically be a part of the entire process. I do not ever want my children to think that food, and meat in particular, is made in some factory and then is shipped to the grocery. Admittedly, much of the food we consume these days is so processed that it sort of **is** coming from a factory. But initially, most food comes out of the ground as a plant, or once ate plants, or fish, or other animals. When we lose that connection with being aware of natural food we lose something in ourselves. We are part of nature, and we forget that at our peril.

I am fortunate to be able to hunt now and look forward to the end of summer when hunting begins again. I have mentioned that of all my forms of hunting, dove hunting is my favorite. I have only been dove hunting half a dozen times, with significantly different outcomes, from only getting a single bird to taking 22 in a couple of busy days. All of my dove hunts have been group hunts, with a collection of friends. Some have been big charity hunts, some opening day extravaganzas on big farms and leases with a hundred hunters. Some have been just a couple of guys waiting by water for the dove to come in.

Part of the reason I love dove hunting are the doves themselves. There are several species of dove we can hunt, primarily mourning doves and white wing doves. Some birds are local and never leave an area, while large numbers are migratory. Dove are fecund with a stable population of around 100 million birds. These medium sized birds are fast fliers, having been clocked at over 50 mph, and they can change direction in an instant. Best of all, they

are very tasty. They have large highly oxygenated breast muscles which give a rich red meat. Commercial dove meat is rare. If you want some of this delicious dove meat you will have to harvest it yourself.

Dove hunting is unlike any other I have done. There is seldom any warning before the birds are on you. You can watch ducks and geese gliding in, attracted by your calls. You have plenty of time to check out deer and pigs from your concealed blind. But doves come on you so fast that a typical engagement from sighting to shooting is usually less than five seconds; often three or less. It seems like doves have some teleportation portal that allows them to just suddenly 'be there'. In fact, they are small, with gray feathers that blend in to the environment, and if they are below the tree line they are hard to see. I think that is the intense attraction of dove hunting. You may spend fifteen minutes, sitting on your shooting bucket or standing by a solitary tree with nothing going on. Then there are a few frantic seconds to identify the bird, determine if it is in range, and engage it. If you are successful, and most of the time you are not, you must then go recover your downed bird. Some people use trained bird dogs. I am sure they love fetching back the birds. In foreign lands such as Mexico or Argentina, bird boys bring back your downed birds. I do not have those luxuries which means I have to fix on the spot where the bird fell and immediately go to it. Usually this is about 20-40 yards away. As you get to the spot you have to look very carefully to locate your bird because the dove's feathers blend in so well with the dirt. Sometimes the bird is still alive and flutters, which makes it easier to find them. You pick the bird up, kill it humanely by twisting its neck, and stuff it in the pouch at the back of your shooting vest. Occasionally you cannot find a bird, especially if it lands in a batch of scrub, but most of the time the birds are retrieved. That is when you are able to hit them.

I have been shooting down in Uvalde for the last couple of years with a group of friends from East Texas. Opening dove season in Uvalde is a big thing for this little town. It is important to get lodging well before the mid-September opening day as the motels sell out. There is not much to Uvalde, a typical little south Texas town with a main drag, some fast-food restaurants, and a town square with the county courthouse. There is not much to recommend Uvalde as a tourist spot... except dove. Farmers permit hunters to go on their land for a fee. Hunting guides establish relationships with local farmers and set up hunts on the farms, also for a fee. Some of the farmers plant crops like millet, not just for the harvest of the crop itself but to attract doves. The farm we would be hunting was very large, and as we drove to the distant field, where we would be hunting in the following morning I was struck by the vast number of doves we saw in the fields. The ground was almost covered with birds, it almost seemed to move.

It is illegal to hunt doves before light, but this is not a big deal as they normally stay roosted in the mesquite thickets that line and delineate the fields until later in the morning. Doves are very considerate that way. That does not mean hunters are going to wait until a reasonable hour to get up to hunt them. Long before first light men are up and off in their pickup trucks for the forty-five-minute drive to the dove fields. The 45-minute drive to the farm where we would hunt featured a long line of red taillights in the dark, evoking memories of long ago commutes to work. Our group parked in a distant corner of the field by a patch of scrub to chat and get ready to go out into the fields. I have mentioned there are a lot of ways to hunt doves, often sitting and waiting at the edges of fields along where you expect the doves to come. In this case, some of us, walked out into the field and sat on a hunting bucket with a padded swivel seat. A note about safety is indicated, especially since gun safety is a big deal for me. Dove hunters use number 8 birdshot, which is very small and quickly loses its lethal potential. At 30 yards it might sting, at 50 it is no more than a mild nuisance. That said, hunters take care not to shoot in the direction of other hunters who are rarely less than 100 yards apart. Of course, the doves are up in the sky, but we are still always careful of low birds and do not shoot in the direction of others.



I am up in the field picking up a dove



Freda parked by the brush outlining the fields

Because there are often a lot of hunters in an area once the doves start coming in there is the sound of shotguns all around and off into the distance. This is good because it lets you know that the doves are flying and are being stirred up. I have been on some hunts where rain muddied the roads and really crushed the hunters up onto a few fields. When a

solitary dove would fly high down the middle of the field so many hunters would open up it sounded like Hanoi in 1972.

We really do not have to be in deep cover while waiting for the birds. Doves have good vision, but it is surprisingly hard to see a man sitting in a field of millet, and they are flying so fast that they are on you before they realize it, too. As I mentioned, they are a difficult target. It is really satisfying to make a successful shot on a high-speed bird, especially if you have missed the last six or eight birds. My first year in Uvalde there were so many doves that I actually had to go and buy another couple of boxes of shells as the hundred rounds I had brought were insufficient to my needs. I did have the satisfaction of limiting out that year, with fifteen birds on one day, with another dozen the next. This year there were fewer doves but still enough that I was able to get enough for a great meal, and best of all lots of wonderful memories. I remember spinning 360 degrees around on my bucket to take a dove that had come from behind me. I also had to twist around so fast on another one that I literally fell off the bucket after I made my successful shot. I also remember doves that flew right in front of me and kept right on flying after multiple missed shots.

Eventually, usually around 1000 or 1030, the doves stop coming in and the rate of shooting diminishes and then stops altogether. Then it is time to head back to where we started the morning before and clean our birds. Dove are easy to clean and requires few tools. You remove the wings with a knife, scissors, or just pull them off. Then drive your thumbs down into its body and pop out the big red breast muscles which are a little larger than a man's thumb. It is easy and brutally effective. Put the deep red breasts into a Ziploc bag to keep cool. The rest of the bird is put into a trash bag for disposal in a dumpster. It is good to have some fresh water nearby because you need to clean off the breasts and you will want to clean your hands. It sounds gross, and it is, but cleaning game is always messy and dove is much easier than any other game I know, including fish.



Waiting to clean some dove.



The hunting party gathers for lunch on opening day

I have hunted doves before in the afternoon and had some success. They will fly from 4 to 6 PM before usually settling down for the night in the scrub. The only problem with hunting in the afternoon is that it is often hot. Few people will get out into the middle of a field when it is sunny and hot. Most set up on the edges of fields next to the trees where there is some shade. I prefer morning hunts where you have the great satisfaction of sitting out in the wilderness on a cool morning and watching the day come in, sometimes with a lovely sunrise.

Soon I will be taking my dove breasts out of the freezer, wrapping them around a jalapeno with some cream cheese, wrapping them in bacon and putting them first on the grill and then in my mouth. Not only are dove delicious, but they are also satisfying in a deeper way – I harvested that tasty bite with not inconsiderable skill. Food you harvest yourself is the best.