

**Seeing the Sourlands**  
**Mourning Dove**  
**By: Jim Amon**



There are many reasons to be a bird watcher, but one of them has to be because it allows you to look closely at beautiful, jewel-like creatures. Most of us birders (as we call ourselves) can remember with great precision when we last saw a Blackburnian Warbler or a Scarlet Tanager, but ask any birder when he last saw a Mourning Dove and he is likely to dissemble. “Why, it was probably yesterday. Or the day before. I don’t know. I see them all the time.” But did he really see it? Could he have really seen it without noticing that this is a really beautiful bird? If they were as uncommon as Blackburnian Warblers or Scarlet Tanagers the sight of one would be memorable. How lucky for us that they are common.

Regular readers of these essays know that I have been celebrating the commonplace lately. I have written on crows, Canada geese and Staghorn sumac; so here is an essay on one of the most common birds in central New Jersey. Estimates vary widely, but some sources state that there are somewhere around 350 million Mourning Doves in the United States; more doves than people. This high number is especially impressive in light of the 20 million or so Mourning Doves that are shot each year by hunters. (That statistic really surprises me. When was the last time you went into a restaurant and saw Mourning Dove on the menu? Or been served it at a dinner party? The answer to both of those questions for me is “never.” It’s

probably a good thing, too, because I am not sure that I could eat one of these charming birds.)

A good explanation for the big dove population is that, while they only have two eggs per brood, they have multiple broods each year—in the southern states they can have as many as six broods a year. The baby doves leave the nest after fifteen days but hang around for a week or two to be fed by their parents.

Doves have a sleek body design—long sharply-pointed tail, thin pointed wings—and they look somewhat like a small falcon when they are in flight. (Their surprisingly small head gives it away quickly, however. When they are perched it is easier to tell them from falcons because falcons perch more-or-less straight up and down while doves' bodies are at an angle when they perch.) They fly fast and straight—none of the loops and swoops of a swallow—and have been clocked at 55 miles per hour.

Mourning doves are ground feeders and dine almost exclusively on seeds. They pack their crops, which are an enlarged part of their esophagus, with seeds, then fly to a safe perch and digest their meal. Scientists have counted the seeds in dove's crops and found that they can carry up 17,200 seeds at once!

Doves do not live in the interior forest, but prefer shrubby areas or open fields or lawns. (They have adapted quite well to human development and probably occur in greater numbers today than before European colonization.) Their nests are pretty casual; they are made from twigs and grass, or simply some other bird's abandoned nest.

One of the things that make doves so special for me is their sound—actually two sounds. When they take off their wings make a sharp whistling sound and their call, which is often heard at the same time, is a cooing noise that some describe as mournful (hence their name) but that I find to be the sound of a very gentle creature. When I hear an alarmed dove take wing it is hard for me to refrain from thinking that I have disturbed a particularly sensitive creature.