

A CLOSER LOOK

By Ron Wilson



ED BRY

Mourning dove and the tiny leg bands (inset) used on the speedy fliers.



RON WILSON

Dove Jewelry

Tiny metal leg bands that shine like new nickels are providing insight into the most numerous migratory game bird in North America.

Since 2003, about 6,000 mourning doves have been trapped in North Dakota and fitted with diminutive, silver bands to determine, among other things, harvest rates, geographic distribution of harvest, and annual survival.

"The population surveys we have been using for years have been fine for keeping an eye on doves," said Mike Szymanski, North Dakota Game and Fish Department migratory game bird biologist. "But the banding data, used in conjunction with these surveys, has provided us with a much better picture of the North American dove population. That's something the No. 1 game bird in North America deserves."

Birds banded in North Dakota have been shot in the state, of course, while others have been harvested in places like Alabama, Georgia, Colorado, Texas

and Mexico. And it varies when the birds are taken. A dove banded on July 24 in North Dakota, for example, was shot in Texas on September 1, while another was taken as late as New Year's Eve.

Hunters are encouraged to check doves for leg bands and report them by calling 800-327-2263, or going online at www.reportband.gov.

More doves are harvested by hunters than all other migratory game birds combined and Texas hunters get their share, shooting about 5 million in 2008. North Dakota hunters, on the other hand, typically take about 50,000 doves per season.

The mourning dove population in North Dakota is stable, Szymanski said, which is certainly not something you can say about those who hunt these challenging, table-friendly birds.

"While we have a lot of doves, there are only about half as many dove hunters today (about 7,500) in North

Dakota as 20 years ago," Szymanski said.

Why hunters aren't flocking to the state's stubble fields and tree rows to shoot at passing doves is something Szymanski, who takes his dove hunting seriously, can't wrap his mind around.

"It's just like waterfowl hunting, except that you get to shoot about five times as many shells," he said. "Doves fly fast and certainly provide a challenge."

The mourning doves' speedy flight is symbolic of its short-lived life as it hurriedly builds ramshackle nests with the aim of producing as many young as quickly as possible. In North Dakota, doves will nest three or four times in spring and summer, fledging about three young in total before the first early fall cold snap, which sends them winging south.

RON WILSON is editor of *North Dakota OUTDOORS*.