



Improve Your Dove Shooting this Season

Texas Parks & Wildlife

LESS IS MORE

The best way to improve your dove shooting is to stuff only one round into your pet smoothbore rather than filling it to the gills.

With no supporting fire and no chance for a double, you will find that making the first one count is not as tough as it might have seemed before. If you hear a shooter bang three times whenever birds come by, you can bet that the total of downed doves versus spent shells is an ever-widening inverse proportion.

No matter how many targets are in the air, make yourself lock onto one and stay there. When it gets within range, bring the gun up naturally and concentrate on the basics such as lead, swing and follow-through. When you begin to score regularly, add ammo and try for some multiple successes.

LIGHTEN UP: As a kid, I used to approach a dove hunt like a soldier preparing for battle. I would insist on cramming my dove vest with three or four boxes of shells. I always kept my autoloader full of ammunition better suited for decoying ducks back in the good old lead-shot days. Shooting 3 3/4 dram, 1 1/4-ounce loads of No. 6 shot through a full choke recoil-operated smoothbore would cause Godzilla to develop a flinch, which I did. I also developed a shoulder that began to look like modern art in a couple of days.

Doves are not hard to kill, and adequate pattern density delivered by small shot such as No. 7 1/2s or 8s will pluck them cleanly from the sky without pummeling your shoulder in the process.

OPEN UP: If pattern density is adequate at the shooting distances involved, you will be successful. A big wad of pellets inside a 30-inch circle may be sweetbreads and circuses to the turkey hunting crowd, but in a field where gray darters are the quarry, I want the biggest spread I can get, provided the pattern has no holes.

Tight chokes and early-season doves go together like hogs and church socials.

There is only one realistic way to check this out for yourself, and that is to pattern your gun. The advent of screw-in choke tubes has been a definite boon to shooters, and since you very likely have these types of chokes, let



me suggest something: Select the one that is more open than what you commonly use and pattern the thing at the outside edge of what you consider legitimate shooting range. For opening day, I will bet that you can get by just fine with improved cylinder or quite possibly a skeet choke.

TERRAIN: Assuming that you know where you are going to hunt when the shooting starts, you can do yourself a major favor well before it's time to load up. Spend some time watching the field, waterhole or whatever that will receive your serious attention later.

In most cases you will find that doves have definite travel routes that they follow. Terrain features like power transmission lines and trees with bare limbs draw birds every time. Roosting and watering

areas also orient flight paths into and out of the field.

Even when you see a field for the first time, take a moment to really look it over rather than simply walking out and looking for a vacant shooting spot. Will you be looking into the sun? Will most birds come from in front, across or from behind you? Those that come unannounced from the back are guaranteed to run up your ammo bill. They also make for some less-than-graceful shooting positions.

If there are few telltale indications of where the birds might prefer to travel or to sit prior to entering the field, at least try to stick to higher ground when possible.

PRACTICE: Last summer a couple of friends and I agreed to get together for a round of sporting clays prior to opening day. We had a ball going through the course, and no doubt this type of thing is beneficial, since any shooting is better than no shooting.

Just remember to carry the same shotgun with the same type of ammunition you'll be using for doves.

For those who prefer do-it-yourself practice (as I do), figure out a way to safely shoot incoming, outgoing and crossing targets. Doves hardly ever jump off the ground in front of you at a known distance once the shotguns begin to bellow.

Also, forget about calling "Pull" and having a target delivered immediately. Announce that you are ready, then let a sneaky friend handle the rest for you.