

# GAME BIRDS OF ILLINOIS

## 2014 Eco-Meet

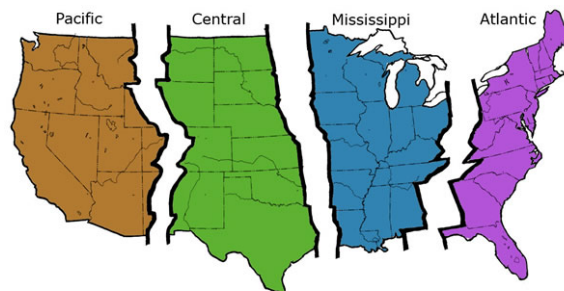
### Junior Varsity

From the Mississippi and the Illinois Rivers, to large lakes and small ponds to the vast expanses of harvested fields, migratory waterfowl and gamebird hunting has deep roots and tradition in Illinois.

The first successful release of pheasants in Illinois came in the 1890s. Since then pheasant hunting in Illinois has thrived. Pheasants at that time thrived in northern Illinois. Much of the success of Illinois pheasant and Illinois pheasant hunting can be attributed to the fertile soil which created prime habitat for the pheasant.

By early in the twentieth century no wild turkeys remained in Illinois. Habitat loss and overhunting had eliminated them from the state. Now turkey hunting is common thanks to the efforts of several organizations. Turkey hunting is allowed in 96 counties throughout the state.

Illinois is in the Mississippi Flyway, an important corridor for migrating waterfowl as they travel to and from their breeding grounds in the North and wintering habitat in the South. Many species of ducks and geese migrate through the state and provide excellent hunting opportunities for sportsmen.



U.S. Migratory Bird Flyways

We will include a representative sampling of Illinois game birds in this study guide.

## **Geese**

Geese, such as Snow Geese and Canada Geese have a longer neck than ducks. They fly in a straight line or a "V" and make loud calls as they fly. You often hear a flock of geese coming before you see them. It's hard to tell male and female geese apart by looking at them. These birds eat grasses, seeds, aquatic plants and often seek food on land.



**Canada Geese flying**



**Canada Goose**

**Description:** The Canada Goose averages about 25 to 43 inches in length. It has a brown body, long black neck and black head. There is a white patch on each side of the head. The chest is light gray. Male and female Canada Geese are similar in appearance.

**Habitat:** Canada Geese live on and around lakes, bays, ponds and marshes. They are often found in and around cities and towns, in city parks, cemeteries, golf courses and on reservoirs. Increasing tolerance of humans has led these birds to become regarded as pests in many urban areas. Many Canada Geese migrate through Illinois in spring and fall. Many of these birds live in Illinois throughout the winter. Spring migration through Illinois starts in late January. This goose is a common summer resident statewide. Fall migration begins in September. Canada Geese may winter as far south as Mexico. The Canada Goose is often mistakenly called a "Canadian" Goose.

**Nesting:** Nesting occurs from March through June. The nest is a depression in the ground, near water or on a muskrat lodge, lined with straw, grasses and down feathers. One to 12 tan eggs are laid. The Canada Goose has been known to nest in a tree in an abandoned Osprey or Bald Eagle nest.

**Discussion:** Canada Geese are grazers, eating grasses, seeds, corn, wheat and aquatic plants. They often feed in open grasslands and stubble fields. A flock of Canada Geese is easily recognized in flight by the "v" formation and call of "ka-ronk" or "ka-lunk."



**Snow Goose**



**Snow goose**



**Snow geese flying**



**Snow Geese dark and white phase**

**Description:** The Snow Goose is also known as the blue goose. Averaging 25 to 38 inches in length, this large bird has a pink bill and pink feet. Its bill is flattened and has a tooth like fringe on the edge to help strain food from the water. Snow Geese actually have several different color patterns. Some of the birds are white with black flight feathers. The blue phase Snow Goose has a blue-gray body and a white head. Other Snow Geese are a mixture of blue and white feathers. Young birds have a dark bill and are mottled with brownish gray above. A dark phase, once considered a separate species called the "Blue Goose," has bluish-gray upperparts, brownish under parts, and white head and neck. Blue-phase birds have spread westward in recent decades and are now found locally throughout their winter range among the thousands of white Snow Geese.

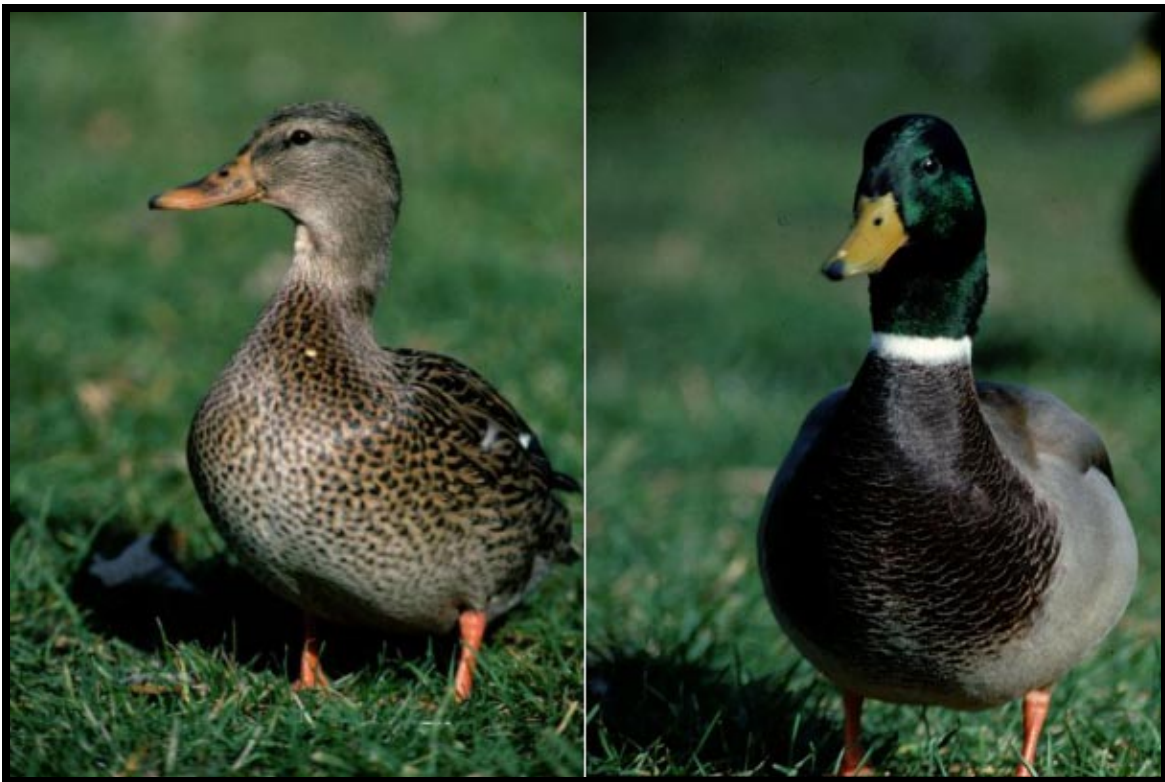
**Habitat:** The Snow Goose is a common migrant and winter resident statewide in Illinois. It is found near water, resting on lakes or feeding in fields. Spring migration begins in late January. Snow geese nest in the Arctic tundra. Fall migrants usually begin to appear in Illinois in October. This bird may winter as far south as the western coast of the Gulf of Mexico.

**Nesting:** Snow Geese breed on the tundra, and nest in colonies. Four to eight white eggs are found in a nest sparsely lined with down. Snow Geese winter in salt marshes and marshy coastal bays, less commonly in freshwater marshes and adjacent grain fields.

**Discussion:** Snow Geese migrate long distances, sometimes flying so high that they can barely be seen. Even at this distance, however, the shifting curved lines and arcs they form as they fly can often identify them. The call is a high-pitched "yelp" or "whouk" which can be heard as these birds fly in an enormous U-shaped flock or a large, irregular mass. Hunters call these birds "Wavies," but not because of the shape of their flocks; the word is derived from "wewe," the Chippewa name for the species. In the Far North fresh plant



shoots are scarce in early spring, but the geese arrive with good fat reserves, built up from plants consumed on prairie marshes where they pause during their long spring migration. Snow Geese graze fields and marshes of Pacific coastal areas and the Southwest all winter. The largest concentrations are in California's Central Valley and along the Gulf Coast of Texas and Louisiana. As they do elsewhere, these birds spend the night resting on open water.



Female

Male

### **Mallard**

**Description:** The Mallard is about 20 to 28 inches in length. The male has a shiny green head, a white ring around the neck, a brown chest and a gray body. The female is brown.

Both the male and female have orange feet, a yellow bill and a violet-blue wing patch.

**Habitat:** The Mallard can be found through out the state of Illinois year round. It can be found in or around marshes, ditches, swamps, grain fields, ponds, rivers and lakes. It is commonly seen in cities and towns. Spring migrants begin arriving in Illinois in February. Fall migration begins in September.

**Discussion:** The Mallard feeds on aquatic plants, corn, grasses, seeds and small aquatic animals. The male makes a "yeeb kwek" sound, while the female produces a "quack" sound. Mallards form mating pairs in the fall but do not mate until spring. Nesting occurs from April through July. Seven to 16 blue-green eggs are laid in a nest on the ground. The nest is lined with grasses, leaves and feathers. The female incubates the eggs and cares for the young. Most mallards nest in southern Canada, but nesting does occur in Illinois. Mallards are unable to fly for about one month in late summer when they are replacing their flight feathers. In the winter, the birds fly away from water to feed in the early morning, return to the water to rest during the middle of the day and fly out again in the evening to feed, returning to the water for the night.





## **Northern Pintail**

**Description:** The Northern Pintail averages 26 to 30 inches in length. The male has a long, thin neck and a long, pointed tail. He has a dark brown head and black and white feathers on the back and sides. A white area on the front of the neck extends in a thin strip into the brown part of the head. The female has a short, pointed tail and brown feathers.

**Habitat:** The Northern Pintail is a common migrant, an uncommon winter resident and a rare summer resident throughout Illinois. It lives in prairies, marshes, ponds and lakes. Spring migrants begin arriving in February. It nests in the northern United States and Canada. Fall migrants may begin arriving in Illinois in July. The pintail winters from the coasts of the Gulf of Mexico and South Carolina to northern South America.

**Discussion:** This duck eats seeds, grasses, aquatic insects and aquatic plants. The male makes a "prrip, prrip" whistle, while the female gives a "quack" sound.



### **Blue-winged Teal**

**Description:** The Blue-winged Teal is about 14 to 16 inches in length. Both the male and female are brown and have a blue wing patch. In spring, the male's head is dark blue with a white crescent-shaped patch between the bill and eye.

**Habitat:** Many Blue-winged Teal migrate through Illinois. Some are summer residents in the northern two-thirds of the state, while others winter in the southern one-third of Illinois. These birds migrate as far south as South America. Blue-winged Teal live in and around ponds, lakes, sloughs, flooded fields, ditches and marshes.

**Discussion:** The Blue-winged Teal eats aquatic plants and animals. Its call is "kick, kick, kick, kick." These fast-flying ducks start arriving in Illinois on their northward migration in late February. They nest in the United States and Canada. In Illinois, teal nest mostly in the northern two-thirds of the state although nests have been found statewide. The nest is built on the ground near a pond or in a marsh. Six to 11 white or greenish eggs are laid in May or June. Southern migration begins as early as July.



**Male Wood Duck**



**Female Wood Duck**

**Description:** Male Wood Ducks have a crested head that is iridescent green and purple with a white stripe leading from the eye to the end of the crest and another, narrower white stripe from the base of the bill to the tip of the crest. The throat is white and the chest is burgundy with white flecks, gradually grading into a white belly. The bill is brightly patterned black, white, and red. The legs and feet are dull straw yellow, and the iris is red. The male call is a thin, high, rising "jeeeeeeee." Female Wood Ducks have a gray-brown head and neck with a brownish, green glossed crest. A white teardrop shaped patch surrounds the brownish-black eye. The throat is white and the breast is gray-brown stippled with white fading into the white belly. The back is olive-brown with a shimmer of iridescent green. The bill is blue-gray and the legs and feet are dull grayish-yellow. Females utter a drawn-out, rising squeal, "oo-eeek" when flushed, and a sharp "cr-r-ek, cr-e-ek" for an alarm call.

**Habitat:** The Wood Duck migrates through Illinois and is a summer resident statewide. Some wood ducks stay in southern Illinois during mild winters. This bird lives in swamps, around rivers and near ponds with wooded areas.

**Nesting:** Wood Ducks feed on acorns, insects, nuts, corn and seeds of aquatic plants. This bird will nest in a tree cavity, barn, chimney or a human-made wood duck box. Spring migrants begin appearing in Illinois in February. Nesting occurs from March through July. Six to 14 white eggs are laid per clutch. Sometimes several females lay eggs in the same nest. This process, called "dumping," may result in as many as 40 young in one nest. Soon after hatching the female gets the young ducks to jump down from the nest. She then leads the young ducks to water, if they aren't already in the water.

**Discussion:** The Wood Duck is one of the few ducks that spends the entire summer in Illinois. While most waterfowl are just passing through on their way to the grassy pothole regions of the northern United States and Canada; Woodies are looking for nest sites in mature forests along rivers and streams. Unique among ducks, they are frequently found in the top branches of tall trees. They have specially adapted feet with long dexterous toes and curved toenails, allowing them to grasp small branches. Their legs are located farther forward on their bodies than on other ducks, making it easier to balance when they find a suitable perch—often a shoreline tree with limbs that extend out over the water. These are adaptations to living in floodplain forests. If woodies nested on the ground like other ducks, they would lose their nests to annual spring floods. In the spring they investigate large old living trees or dead snags. A highly desirable piece of wood duck real estate will be close to water and as much as 30 feet off the ground so that snakes and raccoons will have a hard time finding it. It will have a fairly deep cavity, but a rather small entrance. If a hen finds an ideal site and successfully raises a brood of ducklings, she will often return to the same cavity the following year.

Once the hen is satisfied with the location, she begins laying eggs—usually one per day for about 12 days. Neither parent brings nesting materials to the cavity, but after several eggs

have been laid the hen plucks the down from her own breast and uses it to cover the eggs. During incubation she utters a soft call that may be a form of communication with the not-yet-hatched ducklings. This is a hazardous time-rat snakes are excellent tree climbers and can easily enter the nest to eat eggs or hatchlings. Raccoons have long arms and dexterous hands and if the cavity is not deep enough, they will soon empty it. If all goes well, the eggs hatch in about a month and then the young face their first challenge, leaving the nest. When they are but a day old, their mother flies to a nearby vantage point and calls to them. One by one, using their claws and flapping their tiny wings they ramble up to the entrance, spread their wings, peep loudly, and jump. They are so light that the 30-foot drop causes them no harm.

Once on the ground they travel quickly to water. Wood Ducks are wary birds and rather than spend time in the middle of large lakes and ponds the way other ducks do, they prefer the shallow edges of rivers and streams with dense vegetation where they can hide from overhead predators such as hawks, owls, and great blue herons. It is harder to avoid danger from below. Largemouth bass or snapping turtles can easily capture prey floating on the surface of the water. The dangers that wood duck babies face are so numerous that less than half of them will live long enough to learn to fly. Flying makes it easier for woodies to escape some dangers, but puts them at risk for others. Peregrine falcons have been known to snatch them out of the air, and in the fall, hunters take 20 to 25 percent of the population. In the past this beautiful duck has come frighteningly close to extinction. Protection from hunting, then small bag limits and the placing of artificial nest boxes by conservation groups helped the population rebound. Loss of suitable habitat may be the most serious danger facing wood ducks in the future. Protection of streamside forests and wooded wetlands will help Wood Ducks, as well as many other plants and animals.



## Eastern Wild Turkey



**Male**



**Female**

**Description:** The Eastern Wild Turkey was the turkey first encountered by the Puritans when they settled on the North American continent. The wild Turkey's range covers the entire eastern half of the United States extending into Canada. Adult Wild Turkeys have a small, featherless, reddish head that can change to blue in minutes; a red throat in males; long reddish-orange to grayish-blue legs' and a dark-brown to black body. The head has fleshy growths called caruncles; in excited turkeys, a fleshy flap on the bill expands, becoming engorged with blood. Males have red wattles on the throat and neck. Each foot has four toes, and males have rear spurs on their lower legs.

Turkeys have a long, dark, fan-shaped tail and glossy bronze wings. Turkeys exhibit strong sexual dimorphism. The male is substantially larger than the female, and his feathers have areas of red, purple, green, copper, bronze, and gold iridescence. Female feathers are duller overall, in shades of brown and gray. Males typically have a "beard" consisting of



modified feathers that stick out from the breast an average of nine inches.

**Habitat:** Although turkeys often feed in woods, for mating they move to areas that provide visibility, such as open woods, fields, pastures, shrubby growth, and even quiet roads, using their excellent eyesight to spot danger. Open areas near woods or brush give displaying males and the females they attract a quick means of escape.

**Nesting:** Hens nest on the ground at the base of a tree or shrub, or in tall grass. Nests are shallow dirt depressions engulfed with woody vegetation. Hens lay a clutch of 10-14 eggs, usually one per day. The eggs are incubated for at least 28 days. The poults are precocial; they are relatively mature and mobile when hatched and leave the nest within 12 -24 hours after hatching. At night, turkeys roost in trees. Turkeys living near lakes or river backwaters may roost on tree limbs overhanging water.

**Discussion:** Males are polygamous, so they form territories that may have as many as 5 hens within them. Wild Turkeys are omnivorous, foraging on the ground or climbing shrubs and small trees to feed. They prefer eating acorns and nuts of various trees, including hazel, chestnut, and hickory. Turkeys are also known to occasionally consume small vertebrates like snakes, frogs or salamanders. Poults have been observed eating insets, berries and seeds. They also eat a wide variety of grasses. You might even see one come to clean up the seed underneath your back yard bird feeder.

The idea that Benjamin Franklin preferred the Turkey as the national bird of the United States comes from a letter he wrote to his daughter in 1784 criticizing the choice of the Eagle as the national bird and suggesting that a Turkey would have made a better alternative.

“For the truth the Turkey is in Comparison a much more respectable Bird, and withal a true original Native of America. He is besides, though a little vain and silly, a Bird of Courage, and would not hesitate to attack a Grenadier for the British Guards who should presume to invade his Farm Yard with a red coat on.”

This excerpt from Franklin’s letter to his daughter was written after congress spent six years choosing the eagle as the emblem of the newly formed country. While Franklin’s disapproval with the choice of the Bald Eagle was evident, it is not apparent that he ever officially advocated the turkey.

### Ring Necked Pheasant



**Male**



**Female**

**Description:** Pheasants are long-tailed, seed-eating, chicken-like game birds. Male pheasants, “roosters or cocks” are brilliantly colored with a combination of russet, copper, brown, gray and black on the body, iridescent dark green on the neck, and bright red wattles on the head. A white neck ring is present on most males. In contrast, females or “hens” are light brown with black flecking on each feather. Cock pheasants have spurs on their legs that increase in length, as they grow older. The spurs on juvenile males are generally less than 3/8 of an inch in length; spurs on old males may be almost an inch long.

**Habitat:** Hayfields, oat fields, pastures, idle grassland areas, wetlands and Conservation Reserve Program lands provide good pheasant nesting cover. Hens seek out herbaceous, grassy areas (fields with a mixture of greases and forbs) for nesting because diverse fields provide abundant insects for newly hatched chicks and the forbs reduce the density for the grasses making it easier for the chicks to move around. During blizzard conditions, tall, dense vegetation that effectively stops snow drift and greatly reduces wind-chill is essential to pheasant survival.

**Nesting:** The nest consists of a shallow scratched out depression in the ground that is lined with grass or leaves, concealed in dense, erect grassy vegetation at least 8 to 10 inches tall. Hens lay about an egg a day; first nests usually have 10-12 eggs. The eggs hatch in about 23 days. The young chicks are precocial and can leave the nest and follow the hen within a few hours of hatching. The young resemble the adults by 16 weeks of age. Hens only hatch one brood per year but if a nest is destroyed before the chicks hatch she will build another nest and lay more eggs. Pheasants do not form pair bonds. Hens can continue to lay fertile eggs for three weeks after a single mating.

**Discussion:** Originally an Asian species, the Ring-necked Pheasant was successfully introduced in to North America in 1881. The Department of Natural Resources began stocking pheasants in the mid-west around 1910.

In the past 50 years, conflicting views have fueled debate over the effectiveness of stocking pen-reared pheasants to increase wild ring-necked pheasant populations. Most often, sportsmen have been on one side of this debate, wildlife biologists the other. This frustrates professional wildlife managers because stocking of pen-raised birds is not an efficient means to increase wild bird populations. Developing and enhancing habitat, on the other hand, has proven to help increase ring-neck numbers. By definition, "stocking" is the release of pen-reared pheasants into habitat where wild

birds already are present. "Introductions" or "transplants" are different. These refer to the release of birds into areas where birds are not generally present, using management that has been studied very thoroughly.

### **Bobwhite Quail**



**Female**

**Male**

**Description:** While there are significant differences in the appearance of male and female bobwhite, it may be difficult to distinguish sexes unless the birds are observed at close range. Males have white chins and upper throats, a white stripe that extends from the bill through the eye to the back of the head, and a brown to black chest collar under the throat and chin. Feathers of the breast and abdomen are white with black barring while upper body and wing feathers are muted tones of brown and gray barred with black. By contrast, females have tan instead of white coloration on the throat, chin, eye-strip and underparts. Females also lack black neck collars and exhibit brown barring or mottling of body feathers. Bobwhite Quail are about 9 to 10 inches in length and average about six to seven ounces in weight, with females slightly heavier than males. Newly hatched

chicks have a downy grayish-buff underside with black strips down the side and a chestnut-red back and head.

**Habitat:** Quail are fond of early successional habitats (recently disturbed habitats) especially where several of these habitats come together and create a diversity of edges. An ideal land-use pattern for bobwhite might be an area with 30 percent brushy/weedy habitat and 10 percent woodland interspersed with odd shaped row crop fields. As the degree of mixing or breaking up of these habitat types is increased, a given area will become more attractive to quail. Brushy draws, shrubby and weedy fence rows, and windbreaks also provide both travel lanes and vital escape cover for quail.

**Nesting:** In late March and early April, coveys begin to break up as pair bonds form between individual males and females prior to the breeding season. Bobwhite nests are characteristically found in herbaceous vegetation consisting of mixed grasses and forbs such as those found in fencerows, roadsides or idle areas. Nests are generally located within 50 feet of an edge; both male and female work at building the nest by digging a shallow scrape and lining it with dead leaves and grass. Adjacent grasses are arched over the nest, concealing it from overhead and giving the appearance of a small tunnel.

A clutch usually consists of 14 eggs; although the eggs are laid one day at a time over a two week period, all eggs hatch within a single 24 hour period. Adults and young leave the nest together as soon as the chicks are dry. Mortality of chicks is especially high in the first two weeks following hatch and by fall broods may have sustained losses of 30 to 50 percent. Chicks can fly in two to three weeks. Adults and young remain together in a covey until late fall when the "fall shuffle" takes place. At this time individual quail "shuffle" to different coveys.



**Discussion:** The Bobwhite Quail is a small native gamebird, familiar to many by its cheery “bob-bob-white” whistle throughout the spring and summer. The bobwhite is an important game bird; popular to hunters and second only to the Ring-necked Pheasant. Unfortunately the Bobwhite population is in steady decline because of the change in farming practices. The quail thrived in hedgerows; in the late 1800’s farmers planted Osage hedges which were perfect habitat for quail. When hedges were replaced with barbed wire fences the quail habitat was destroyed and the populations started to decline. Organizations such as Pheasants and Quail Forever help farmers and other land owners to create suitable habitat for these game birds.



## Mourning Dove



**Description:** The Mourning Dove is a medium-sized, slender dove approximately 12 inches in length. Mourning Doves have perching feet, with three toes forward and one reversed. The legs are short and reddish colored. The beak is short and dark, usually a brown-black color.

The plumage is generally light gray-brown and lighter and pinkish below. The wings have black spotting, and the outer tail feathers are white, contrasting with the black inner tail feathers. Below the eye is a distinctive crescent-shaped area of dark feathers. The adult male has bright purple-pink patches on the neck sides, with light pink coloring reaching the breast. Females are similar in appearance, but with more gray coloring. Juvenile birds have a scaly appearance, and are generally darker.

Its plaintive *woo-oo-oo-oo* call is common throughout its range, as is the whistling of its wings as it takes flight. The species is a strong flier, capable of speeds up to 55 mph.

**Habitat:** Habitats include various open and semi-open environments, including agricultural and urban areas. The species has adapted well to areas altered by humans. The bird is abundant, with an estimated population of 130 million birds. In many areas, the Mourning Dove is hunted as a game bird for both sport and its meat.

**Nesting:** The female dove builds the nest although the male helps to gather materials. The nest is constructed of twigs, conifer needles, or grass blades; its construction is very flimsy. Most nests are built in trees, both deciduous and coniferous; sometimes nests are built in shrubs or on the ground. There are two eggs in a clutch. Both parents take turns incubating the eggs and attending to the young, called squabs.

**Discussion:** The Mourning Dove is monogamous and forms strong pair bonds. Pairs typically reconvene in the same area the following breeding season or sometimes may remain together throughout the winter. However, lone doves will find new partners if necessary.

The primary predators of this species are diurnal birds of prey, such as falcons and hawks. During nesting, grackles, housecats and rat snakes will prey on Dove eggs.

The number of individual Mourning Doves is estimated by Birdlife International to be approximately 130 million. As a gamebird, the Mourning Dove is well-managed, with roughly 45 million shot by hunters each year.