

# On Wisconsin Outdoors

With the Dick Ellis Experts

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## A Time To Hunt

### Mourning doves, ruffed grouse push fishing aside

By Dick Ellis

I'm starting to puppy shop. Don't know yet what he will be, but I do know that 16 year old Blue Boy has been gone for more than a year. And, a daddy's double nightmare...my 15 year old daughter (with a temporary drivers license yet)... hit me recently with the question; "Dad, can we get a puppy?"

Good memories, and my own reasons for wanting another dog, come back with new hunting seasons. In recent weeks, with my brother John Ellis I ushered in the ruffed grouse season in the far north and the mourning dove season in the far south. Each of these hunts included yellow lab Gunner, Blue's life-long hunting partner now age 13, and Dillon, Gunner's two year old blood line relative who would actually rather ride a Pontoon Boat on the Manitowish Chain than hunt.

If he had fingers, Dillon would surely sip martinis and smoke fine cigars. If he could talk, he might rasp, "I say old man, these bird were after...might they get a bit angry and do they bite?" It must be that English strain of lab in him that doesn't guarantee brush busting, depending on his mood. Gunner, on the other hand, would rather die than lose a bird, even now with the joint and back pain that came with the geriatric years. He is all American lab and



Ruffed grouse flushes were sporadic despite a three percent increase in the birds' population in northern Wisconsin. Young yellow lab Dillon and John Ellis head back to the truck with the sun dropping on another day. (Dick Ellis)



"The open agricultural lands of southern Wisconsin are perfect for hunting the migrating mourning dove. Wisconsin hunters must go north to find ruffed grouse. (Dick Ellis)

has always played the role.

We were given permission for the first time to hunt a Waukesha County farm for mourning doves. A 12-pack of beer for the owner sealed the deal and simply being polite and not abusing the privilege has already earned a season long invitation to come again.

The dove is the perfect target if the real goal of the hunt is to

allow an aging dog easy retrieves in easy-to work cover. The farm has acres of standing corn with rows cut with a combine every 100 yards, surrounded by soybeans. It didn't have the sunflowers or some grains that can be ideal to draw in mourning doves, but regardless it did appeal to many of the birds that were flushed or taken as they darted in small flocks overhead.



Yellow lab Gunner, still with the heart of a great hunter at 13, returns to John Ellis near an oak ridge with a good acorn crop that led to two grouse flushes during a late September hunt in Vilas County. (Dick Ellis)

In addition to making a fine hors d'oeuvres and offering a difficult target, at least for me and my .410, it is biologically sound to hunt the mourning dove. 500 to 600 million mourning doves migrate annually in the United States, and five to six million doves migrate through Wisconsin. With or without hunting, the birds suffer 60 to 70 percent annual mortality and have a life expectancy of less than one year. Predation, disease, hunting and accidents each take a toll. To compensate, the dove produces several broods of young annually. But, hunting is a biologically proven non-factor specific to survival of the species.

In Wisconsin, between 20,000 and 30,000 hunters harvest between 100,000 and 200,000 migrating or resident mourning doves annually. The state's first hunt in 2003 drew approximately 23,000 hunters who harvested about 150,000 doves. With the dove population slightly increasing, last year was the first year that the season was also increased by 10 days. That continued in 2009 with a September 1 start concluding November 9. Hunters may take 15 birds daily.

Especially with the new Mentored Hunting Program in Wisconsin debuting September 1



Heavy foliage was the price to pay for hunters wanting to hunt grouse early in the season in northern Wisconsin. (Dick Ellis)

that allows 10 year old boys and girls to hunt under strict guideline with an adult, dove hunting is perfect for introducing young hunters to the shooting sports. The early fall hunts usually combine mild weather with difficult but ample shooting opportunities with both flush and pass shooting on birds that can reach 45 miles per our on the wing. It is the perfect blend to introduce a young person to hunting.

Although we annually introduce new hunters to the field, this hunt was much more for the dogs. When the day was done, John had bagged four doves; and Gunner had retrieved each dove with a field veteran's expertise. Even Dillon, with a dove in his mouth, seemed to finally understand that Gunner is on to something; these things with feathers may actually be more fun than tennis balls and Frisbees.

The same week, the same hunters with the same two dogs ventured 300 miles north to the Northern Highland State Forests. With almost all of the leaves still on the trees and the autumn colors not yet at 30 percent, the little shooting we did have was difficult at best. I didn't shoot and John missed.

In our pocket of the northland, the population is reportedly up three percent in 2009. Some hunters we spoke to are reporting low grouse activity, others...great hunting. Except for photos sent to your local editor, we'll save a more detailed grouse hunt column for later in the year with ideal conditions meaning, the leaves will be down.

But for now, if I were you...I'd start planning that northern grouse hunt. It looks like it will be worth your time. Signing off for now. Somewhere...I've got a puppy to adopt. *Wo*



At 13, Gunner rests with the writer on an overgrown logging road during a late September hunt for Ruffed Grouse near Manitowish Waters.