

Welcoming back our native dove

By Larry Hyslop



Our native dove, the mourning dove, photo courtesy of USFWS

Three mourning doves flew up from where they had been searching for seeds beneath the feeders. As they flew off, their wings made that musical and characteristic whistling sound. After a winter of seeing only the invasive Eurasian collared dove, it was nice to have our native mourning dove back for the summer.

Let me compare Elko's two doves, the one native and the other introduced. It is easiest to tell them apart as they jump off the ground and fly away. The mourning dove tail is long, pointed and edged with white feathers. Its wing feathers whistle as it takes off. The collared dove tail is fan-shaped with a broad white band.

Overall, the collared dove is larger and lighter in color. Its most distinctive characteristic is the dark band circling the back of its neck. The mourning dove is slimmer, brown and carries a dark spot on its cheek.

The mourning dove's call has been described as a mournful or haunting cuu-aaah cuu cuu. The collared dove's call is often described as a repetitive, slightly annoying, cuu-uu cuu.

The native mourning dove is one of the most abundant birds in North America. It lives in rural areas where it is often seen by people. Its range covers this continent from southern Canada to all of Mexico and parts of the Caribbean. The collared dove was introduced to the Bahamas during the 1970s and has spread across much of the same range. Scientists are studying how the bird is accomplishing this explosive growth. This dove has spread across the continent much faster than did house sparrows and starlings.

The mourning dove is protected by the Migratory Bird Treaty Act of 1918 and is extensively hunted as an upland game bird species. Hunters throughout Nevada pursue it during the month of September. Collared doves have no protection, no hunting season or limits on its take. This plumper dove is said to be delicious but is not (yet) being hunted as much as it might.

Scientists have been trying to ascertain if the explosive growth of the collared dove population is affecting the mourning dove. The worry is the two dove species might be eating the same foods or nesting in the same spots. Since the collared dove stays here year round, it can begin nesting much earlier than the migratory mourning dove. So far, there is no evidence of a decline in mourning dove numbers due to collared doves. Mourning doves have declined only slightly in Nevada over the last ten years, a decline that probably has more to do with habitat loss. The hope is the collared dove might settle into a slightly different niche and not affect the mourning dove. Another concern is the possible role of the collared dove in the transmission of an emerging infectious disease called pigeon paramyxovirus.

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