

Western Birds

The
Wingshooter's
Newsletter



Dove Special

Southern California Edition

August 30, 2019



2019
Public Land
Dove Forecast

Dove prospects on public lands are better than the last few seasons



This year's dove hunting season forecast is one of generally good news for Southern California dove hunters who hunt the public hunting areas. Across the board, conditions are better than last year and better than the last several seasons in many spots.

The maps, normally a part of this issue, are not included in this summary for 2019 because they are nearly identical to last year's issue. If you need the detailed maps and aerial images of the public hunting areas, the 2018 issue (along with the 2017 edition) is still on the Outdoor News Service's [Western Birds page](#).

This is the region-by-region update to those issues:

IMPERIAL VALLEY

The number one destination for Southern California hunters, the Imperial Valley draw thousands of sportsmen opening day. The major destinations include the fields planted by Desert Wildlife Unlimited (DWU), a volunteer group in the valley, and the Imperial Wildlife Area's Wister Unit fields and the Finney-Ramer Unit fields.

DWU FIELDS: A major effort spearheaded by Leon Lesicka and Rob Yates, both of DWU, has revived the public hunting fields in the north end of the Imperial Valley for 2019.

DWU planted 20 plots of wheat on the private ground this year. The fields are all located along Highway 111 between the Wister Unit of the Imperial Wildlife Area (on the south end of the Salton Sea) and the town of Calipatria. The map to these fields is available at the above link, the Department of Fish and Wildlife's website, and throughout the Imperial Valley at local businesses.

Yates said that last year the fields were generally poor to fair for dove hunting. The problem? The Department of Fish and Wildlife (DFW), which provides grant money to DWU to purchase the seed planted in these fields didn't come in time and most fields had no plantings. While volunteer seed plants that came up and were mowed and thrashed before last year's season opener, the hunting was mediocre at best on most plots.

Yates said 2019 is a different story. All of the fields were



planted on time and all have been cut since mid-August, giving the doves plenty of time to find the feed and aggregate on the fields in big numbers.

"We try to cut early enough so the birds find the fields and use them, but not so early that they eat everything and move on. We tried selling tickets to the birds to limit how many

came to each field, but that didn't work out so well," joked Yates.

His bottom line reeked with enthusiasm. Yates simply summed it up by saying "there are just birds *everywhere*."

"I've been out the last three evenings checking on the fields and posting up the public hunting signs, and the fields look awesome. I'm seeing hundreds and hundreds of dove," said Yates on Thursday morning. He said he thought the days of 30 minute, 15-bird limits on these fields were back.

Earlier this month when I spoke with Yates, he was a little concerned that monsoon rains and winds would run a lot of the birds out of the area.

"We haven't had any storms, and it looks like we won't get any. So it looks good, really good," said Yates.

IMPERIAL WILDLIFE AREA: While the DFW promised last year there would be more field planted for dove on the **Wester Unit** of the Imperial Wildlife Area, there has actually been a reduction of three fields from last year.

The two fields that have been planted again are at the north end of the Wister Unit right along Highway 111 (and just across the road from the most northerly fields done by DWU). On the waterfowl hunting map, they are field 413 East and 312A. Both have been knocked and are attracting a lot of birds.

There were standing wheat fields last season in U10, T10, and S20 on the south end of Wister, but those fields were not planted this year.

At the **Finney-Ramer Unit** fields south of Calipatria, the Wheat Field and the Game Farm Field, were both planted for this season and have been rolled. As usual, both of these fields are holding a lot of doves and should be very good for this year's opener.

The loss of the three Imperial WLA fields will concentrate
(Continued on page 3, see *Dove prospects...*)

Are the public fields really all that crowded?

That is a valid question. We all hear about how crowded the public dove hunting fields are in the Imperial Valley and Blythe region are each year.

But I guess its really a matter of perspective.

If you are one of those hunters who bemoans the "mobs" and the shot raining down and the occasional peppering from a hunter shooting at a bird -- not even necessarily a low bird -- from across a big field, here is some data that might make you appreciate what we have today. It also might make you realize that our hunter ranks have shrunk to the point of disappearing in two generations.

Dove hunting data compiled over the years by both the state and federal governments tell the story by the numbers.

Going back 50 years and comparing data from the 2018 season with the data from the 1968 season is an interesting exercise.

In 2018, the federal government reported that California had 50,100 dove hunters and that they harvested 766,900 mourning doves for the entire season. That works out to a 15.3-birds-per-hunter season average.

In 1968 the state did the dove survey, and that year a total of 263,300 dove hunters took to the field. During that season they bagged an incredible 4.4 million doves, which is a 16.9 bird season average.

Think about those numbers for a second. There were *six times* more dove hunters in 1968 than in 2018.

Six times!

Just imagine what it would be like to put six times more dove hunters around the fields at the Palo Verde Ecologic Reserve or the DWU fields in the Imperial Valley. Old timers remember what it was like to hunt around really crowded fields, when the distance between hunters on some fields was better measured in feet rather than in yards. Just something to think about.

Dove prospects....

(Continued from Page 2)

more hunters on the other public fields, but with the better feed crops at DWU fields allowing hunters to spread out more, it should not be any more crowded than last season.

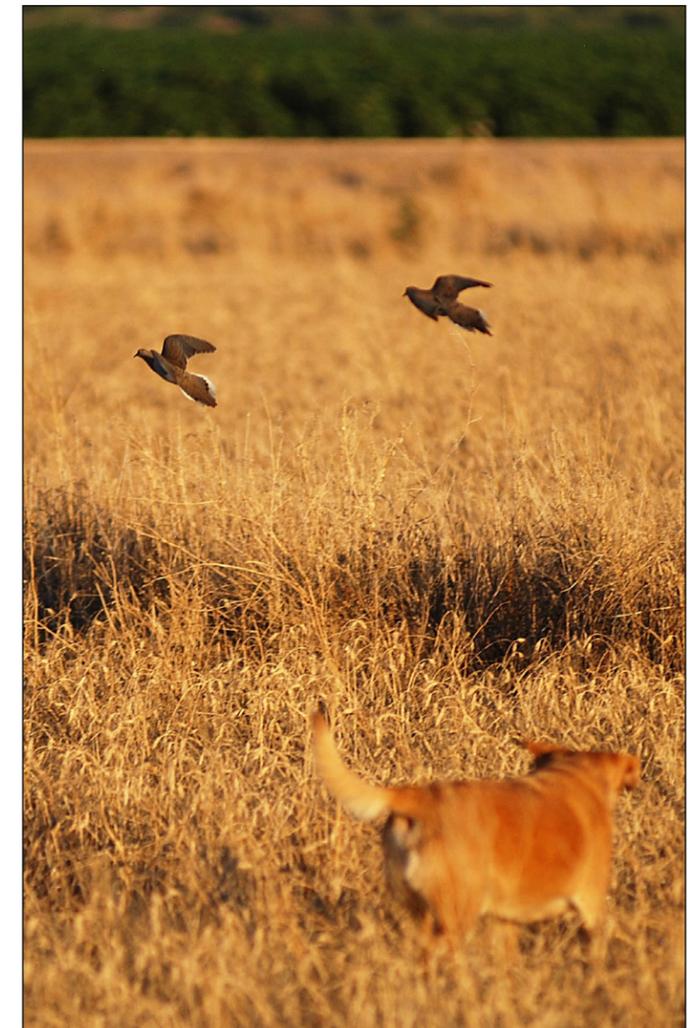
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BLYTHE/PALO VERDE REGION

The big news in this region is the growth of Palo Verde Ecological Reserve (PVER) since last dove season, The Wildlife Conservation Board approved the purchase of 328 acres along the Colorado River between 6th and 8th Avenues. (Here's a [link to a story](#) on the acquisition.)

While this news is not significant for this season because the fields are supposedly fallow right now (although there were rumors of strips of wheat planted for this year, I haven't been able to verify that), the DFW is already planning to continue its efforts to restore native riparian and desert scrub habitat. There may also be some fields planted in the future on this new ground that will give dove hunters in this region even more public hunting spots. A new map of the wildlife area showing the new addition is [available here](#) on the DFW's website.

For 2019, new DFW biologist Ryan Pete said the usual area at the extreme north end of the wildlife area of 2nd Avenue (see last year's map and aerial photos) was planted in wheat again this year. The grain crops were knocked
(Continued on page 4, see *Dove prospects...*)



3 Grain fields have been planted at public hunting areas all across Southern California. The seed crops attract doves like magnets.



Dove prospects....

(Continued from Page 3)

down in big strips over two weeks ago, and the birds were stacking up on the grain in big numbers — perhaps in even greater abundance than last season.

The southerly field between 8th and 10th Avenues were planted in a mix of wheat and milo. It also has been cut/thrashed and the number of birds here is exceptional. As noted in past issues, these fields are best accessed off 8th Avenue. There is a cattail marsh between 10th Avenue and the planted fields, and access is impossible by vehicle and difficult (wet) by foot.

“The dove are really thick already in these areas, and while I’m new here, I’ve been told we’re seeing slightly above average abundance this year. North PVER is looking really good,” said Peat.

Across the river on the Arizona size, the **Cibola National Wildlife**, on the Arizona side of the river but a popular destination for Southern California hunters, was planted by the Friends of the Cibola National Wildlife Refuge. Farm Unit II has 50 acres of wheat in 20 and 30 acres patches along with 100-plus acres of safflower and sunflower. The field was mowed in a “sinuous” pattern in an attempt to make it more natural-looking and “enhance the hunter experience,” according to Nancy Spencer-Morris, the new refuge manager.

John Rosenfeld, with Friends of the Cibola National

Wildlife Refuge, said leaving more of the field uncut would make retrieving birds more difficult and increase the likelihood of seeing or getting bit by rattlesnakes.

“There are more doves down there than I’ve seen in five years,” said Rosenfeld. “It’s going to be the place to go.”

WESTERN RIVERSIDE COUNTY

The **San Jacinto Wildlife Area** (near Lake Perris) should be good this year, according to Tom Trakes, the DFW supervisor managing the facility.

“There are a lot of birds,” said Trakes. “Conditions are excellent with plenty of food and water for them.”

Trakes said between the wheat and safflower planted throughout the wildlife area, dove weed across the upland birds side of the wildlife area, and the volunteer seed crops that came up after the good winter and spring rains, there are a lot of doves using the wildlife area.

Trakes said cutting has been late this year because of so many issues at the area this season, and most of the fields were cut very late this year. In spite of that, there are already more doves on the area than last year.

“Overall, the wildlife area looks better for doves than last year, but I’m not seeing the big numbers all this food would seem to indicate,” said Trakes.

Top areas: 1) The mowed level lands at the south end of the wildlife area on the east side of Davis Road just north of Ramona Expressway, especially along the San Jacinto River Flood Control Channel. 2) The fields and tree line along

(Continued on page 4, see *Dove prospects....*)



Dove prospects....

(Continued from Page 3)

the historic San Jacinto River channel on the west side of Davis Road. The grain fields in this area were mostly mowed in the past week. 3) The tree line along the San Jacinto River channel west of Davis Road. Birds have been using this tree and brush line for perching and as a flyway.

Trakes said he was disappointed with the fields off Bridge Street this year, mostly because they had been unable to mow the area until late this week. So much sunflower came up that it created a jungle, but with mowing going on just Thursday and Friday this week, Trakes didn’t think the birds would be able to pile up on the field until well after opener.

However, there were a decent number of doves using the olive trees at the green gate on Bridge Street while the tractor was working late this week.

This Bridge Street area was so wet, they were unable to get a tractor in there to mow earlier. This also led to the over-your-head growth of sunflowers and other plants.

NORTHERN SAN BERNARDINO COUNTY

At **Camp Cady Wildlife Area** east of Barstow, Bruce Kenyon said there were “a lot more birds that last year,” and that the fields were planted early this year and were holding a lot of dove. Kenyon, a volunteer from Quail Forever, has been keeping the operation running the last several seasons.

Cady is a little-known wildlife area along the Mojave River nestled between Afton Canyon and Newberry Springs. It has a number of ponds and good roosting trees along the river channel and has historically had good evening shoots as birds come back from feeding across the desert to water and roost in the evenings. The addition of farm fields planted with grain crops the last several years (with varying degrees of success) has made this area even better for dove hunters.

This field (shown on last year’s map) is on the west side of Harvard Road and there is a parking area adjacent to the field. Last season’s crop was mediocre at best, and the hunting was just fair, but Kenyon expected this season to be better.

While the seed crop was not as good as hoped it was still pretty decent. Portions of the field were cut (an earlier cut would have been ideal for dove opener), and this area is holding a pretty fair number of birds.

Reports and photos sent via e-mail (odwriter@verizon.net) are always welcome for our post-opener updates.

Good luck!

— *Jim Matthews*

Non-lead shotshells will be tough to find if you haven’t already stocked up

Hunters who have not already purchased steel dove loads for the Sunday, September 1, opener are likely to be hard-pressed to find non-lead ammunition, especially 20 gauge shells.

In a survey of retail outlets across Southern California on Thursday afternoon, many reported they were completely out of shotshells featuring No. 7 or No. 6 steel. Others had very short supplies and expected to be out by the end of the day.

Just some of the stores surveyed and how much steel shotshell ammunition they had on hand:

— Bass Pro Shops, Rancho Cucamonga: Completely sold out of all upland steel in all gauges.

— Turner’s Outdoorsman, Corona: Total supply on hand Thursday was five cases (50 boxes) of 12 gauge Fiocchi No. 7 steel. No 20 gauge ammunition was available. Store manager Dustin Hilak said it would “all be gone in the next three hours.”

— Turner’s Outdoorsman, West Covina: Store manager Mason Goodrich drove to the warehouse Wednesday morning because his shelves were empty. As of Thursday, the store had 20 boxes of 12 gauge Kent No. 7s and 200 boxes of Fiocchi 12 gauge 7s. No 20 gauge was available.

— Turner’s Outdoorsman, Lake Forest: The inventory on Thursday down to three boxes of 12 gauge No. 6s. But 22 cases (220 boxes) of Fiocchi 12 gauge 7s arrived Friday morning.

— Ammo Brothers, Santa Ana: While the store had “several cases” of 12 gauge 6s in steel in both Kent and Winchester. There was no 20 gauge steel on the shelves.

— Ammo Brother, Cerritos: Almost completely out of stock with only 12 boxes of Kent 12 gauge 6s in inventory.

— Big 5, Palm Springs: There was one promotion 100-round pack of 12 gauge steel 7s, and three boxes of 25. In 20 gauge, there were just two boxes still available of steel 7s.

— Big 5, Highland: This store had a total of 11 boxes of steel still in inventory, mixed between 12 and 20 gauge.

— Ace Hardware and Home Center, Blythe: The store sold out of 12 gauge Friday, but it had 14 cases of 20 gauge (140 boxes) available on Friday. The store was also one of the only to report other gauge steel on hand, with 10 cases of steel 28 gauge and 11 cases of .410.

Across the stores, prices ranged from a low of about \$6 per box of 25 shells to \$19 a box.

Western Birds

The Wingshooter's Newsletter



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