

Paper Mache for 8-28-26

By David Read

Last Sunday, the morning after our Bandits & Bandanas extravaganza at the Sutter Theater, I was sitting on our patio watching two Eurasian Collared-Doves eating sunflower seeds from one of our feeders. These non-native doves originated in Asia and are now widespread throughout North America. We are also regularly visited by native Mourning Doves, whose soft, plaintive call gives them their name. This got me thinking about my long history with doves, starting with the miniature Inca Doves I remember seeing growing up in Florida. It also reminded me that September 1 brings the opening of dove season in much of the country.

I still have a photograph of my brother, father, grandfather and me on my first dove hunt somewhere out in the Everglades. Even here in suburban Plumas Lake, the sounds of distant gunfire in the adjacent fields on opening morning remind me of our region's rural roots and hunting heritage. Since Florida, I've hunted doves in Maryland, California and Mexico. My brother organizes an annual September trip to Blythe, considered by many hunters to be "dove central" because its combination of water and agricultural land attracts enormous numbers of birds for those in pursuit of the wily bird of peace.

There is something wonderfully contradictory about dove hunting. It is one of America's oldest hunting traditions, yet the object of all that preparation is a bird weighing only a few ounces that flies like a fighter pilot. Doves regularly make a mockery of us. Dove hunting is often less about marksmanship than humility. Mourning Doves are among the most abundant and widely distributed birds in North America and are America's most popular migratory game bird. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service estimated roughly 337 million in the United States alone in the fall of 2024. That year, hunters harvested about 15 million.

The tradition is deeply woven into rural life. Families and friends meet before sunrise, speculate about where the birds will fly and tell stories about previous hunts in which, curiously, everyone remembers shooting much better than they did. Perhaps that's why dove hunting has endured. For many hunters, it isn't really about bringing home a limit of birds. It's about being outdoors at sunrise, hearing wings overhead and sharing a morning with people whose company matters.

At the other extreme is dove hunting in Argentina, where Eared Doves are considered agricultural pests and hunters may shoot hundreds of birds in a day. That seems excessive to me. One need only remember the Passenger Pigeon. Once numbering in the billions, it was driven to extinction through massive commercial hunting and habitat loss. Here at home, dove hunting is carefully regulated, with seasons and limits established through federal and state wildlife-management systems. In California, September 1 is typically the single busiest day on the hunting calendar. Hunters also bring considerable economic activity to rural communities through spending on ammunition, licenses, fuel, meals, lodging and equipment.

Of course, hunting isn't universally embraced, and reasonable people can disagree about it. Ethical hunting carries responsibilities: obey the limits, retrieve downed birds, avoid waste, respect private property and know exactly what you're shooting at. Maybe that's the larger lesson. We live in an age of instant gratification but dove hunting refuses to cooperate. You can buy the finest shotgun, fanciest camouflage and every decoy known to humankind. The dove still gets the final vote. And very often, it votes no. I've pretty much hung up my dove decoys and camo. Opening day friends have moved or died. What does all of this have to do with art and culture? I often turn to the work of one of my childhood heroes, the artist, Audubon, who painted many dove and pigeon species, several now extinct. His beautiful paintings of the Passenger Pigeon and Mourning Dove show once again the longevity of great art long after the season ends.