

Dove Hunting

I saw John Eric pull his truck under the shade of a mesquite tree. He got out with his shotgun in hand, lowered the back gate and looked at me with a twinkle in his good eye. The sun was just beginning to set. I could smell the pungent wood smoke from the fire that had been slowly forming the perfect brisket just above it. I smiled at John Eric and gave a manly nod in his direction. Of all the fields in all the ranches in all the world, he had to walk into mine. John Eric was the best dove shot I had ever seen. He was like the NBA player who can casually toss the ball over their shoulder and still hit nothing but net. I, on the other hand, had good days and days in which I was sorely tempted to check that I wasn't firing blanks at the little gray-feathered rockets.



"Dead bird comin!" hollered John Eric.

He fired once. The dove tumbled with grace through the air almost floating, ever so gently into the back of John's truck.

"Nobody likes a show off," I said, fully cognizant that my daughter Megan was watching the spectacle from a folding chair under the mesquite tree that I was calling my own.

John chuckled, "It's kinda of a Zen thing. Ya gotta be at peace with your inner predator." He spat tobacco juice to add emphasis to his authority on the subject.

I took a deep breath and called on my ancestral hunter spirit. Just then, a blast of birds exploded across the treetops. I fired once, twice, three times. They were gone. I checked my gun for blanks. I looked toward Megan.

"Dad's just warming up," I told her. She smiled sweetly and said, "It's ok dad, they were fast." I took another deep breath and hit redial on my predator spirit. Noticing that John hadn't fired I looked at him with a question mark on my face.

"I don't want to limit out too soon," he answered.

Another brace of birds came roaring in. "Dead bird comin!" John yelled.

We both fired. John's bird took his place just past his cousin, missing the truck bed by a few yards. My bird acquiesced coming to rest directly at Megan's feet.

"Good one dad!" She said. I smiled silently while thinking, 'I hope she doesn't think I can do that again.'

As the evening began to fade, I could here the popping sounds of the other guys' shotguns as flights of dove slid overhead. We were all Texas Peace Officers. Some of us had brought our kids and some of us had just brought ourselves. The kids were all happy when their dads dropped a bird and just as happy when the birds passed overhead unharmed. When the hunting was over, we gathered around the fire eating brisket, sausage, and fresh dove breast wrapped in bacon with a jalapeno in the center for extra flavor. We laughed and shared stories. We made memories and enjoyed being alive in our beloved Texas hills.

In Texas, hunting is religion. Like high school football and barbeque, it is part of the fabric of our lives. In Texas, dove hunting is communal. It is the fellowship, the sharing of all things natural. It reminds us that we are all connected to the land and that we owe it respect. Under the tree line or around the fire-pit we experience both solitude and tribal community. We are accountable for our actions and remember where our food comes from. We know that the real "circle of life" is not some anthropomorphic cartoon lion king, but rather that life and death are beautifully connected; each a transition,

each one supporting another.

The doves that are most common to the Texas Hill Country include the morning, white-winged, and Inca. The tiny Inca dove is gray with a scaly look to their back. The Inca dove is not a game species and as such is not hunted. The common morning dove is sleek, long tailed and fast. The white-wing dove is larger with white patches on their wings and corners of their tails. For the purpose of dove season, the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department has divided the state into three regions: north, central, and south. The Texas Hill Country is predominately in the central region with the season being between September 1st and October 25th, with an additional mini-season from December 26th to January 9th, 2010. You can get more information at txoutdoorannual.com.

I have always loved doves as I tend to love the entire beautiful, natural world. People I can only love one at a time. Doves fly with grace, speed, and purpose. They call to me in the morning as I sit on my porch and in doing so tell me that God has granted me another day looking down at the grass instead of up at the roots. My dear readers who are not hunters may wonder how I can kill something I truly love. The answer is that I know that it doesn't matter whether your hunting dove or raspberries, if you really want to learn to love, respect, and protect nature; you need to be a participant and not an observer.

When I lived in Africa, I traveled from the rainforest of the Ivory Coast to the grasslands of Kenya's Mara plains, and from the coastal mountains of Cape Town to the deserts of the Namibian Coast. One thing I learned was that wildlife only survived when there was a monetary value placed on its preservation. Without exception, it was the participants and not the observers who saved the wildlife and its habitat. By definition participants are stakeholders.

Dove season is the gate keeper to hunting season. If you're a hunter or a hunting dog, you can feel it coming on. When I was a kid my dad had a dog named Kip. Every year she would seem to rest up throughout the "dog days" of summer with barely a wag of her tail. But as the days grew shorter she would become more animated, happy, and alive. Soon she would be running through the fields, waiting for the birds, wagging her tail. She was in her element. Each season brings new memories. In the end it is our connection to the land and to each other that truly matters. Things come and go.

This season, Megan will be back at college and therefore sadly won't be there to watch me miss. I will miss her as I stand there with the sky growing

dim and my spirits growing brighter. Still, I am taking a special friend. This season, I will stand at the tree line in the evening half-light. In my arms will be my fathers' old 16 gauge, Ithaca model 37. He has passed it on to me. It is not the gun that I value, but the memories that come with it. As a kid I would follow him as he hunted and that is how I learned about gun safety and respect for the environment. I learned about building friendships and memories. I learned about honor, integrity, and about overcoming hardship. I learned what it is to be alive.

Dove hunting done right, can teach a young person a great deal of the important things that made us a great nation, things that many of us seem to be forgetting, or even shunning. Maybe from time to time we all could use a little reminding. All we have to do is get out of our houses, cars, and cubicles; stand at the tree line with a few smiling friends.....and participate. X

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