

The full-fledged birds of peace

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By JOHN L. SLOAN

I think I was 11-could have been 12. It was hot, so hot the road was sweating. We pulled the old red truck into the dusty lane and shut the engine down. The gate and the cornfield, picked four days ago, stretched in front of us. I got my Winchester 20-gauge and three boxes of shells from the back. Of course, they were Peters High-Velocity. The good ones. The gun was one of the now valuable, red W ones. Wish I still had it.

Sweating like pigs, Uncle Lloyd and I headed for the small pond where we would setup. It was September 1 and in 15-minutes, dove season would open and I would probably shoot my three boxes of shells. Hopefully I would kill a few doves. They make a great jambalaya and just the breasts, wrapped in bacon and grilled aren't bad either.

How many years and how many shells have I spent since then? From that hot, dusty kid and through the miles of fields and acres of food spreads, years sprinkled with backyard shoots and massive, catered hunts.

Dove season marks the start of hunting season even though squirrel season opens earlier here in Tennessee. The great many of us only hunt a few days at the start of the season. The addicted wing shooters hunt all through the season. It opens here tomorrow and I suggest you consult your hunting guide for exact dates since I am no longer smart enough to figure it all out. What I know for sure is, it starts at noon tomorrow and the limit is 15.

On that first afternoon, if memory serves, I killed five birds out of my three boxes of number 7-1/2 lead shot. Those shells were paper. This was before plastic took over and stopped the problem of swelling from moisture. I had a brand new shell vest with a lined game bag and the pockets of the vest were loaded with shells. A carefully wrapped sandwich-baloney and cheese on white, loaf bread-and a bottle of water bumped shoulders with a couple candy bars

Naturally, the candy bars would melt and the sandwich never was eaten because as we opened the gate, the air was filled with doves.

Uncle Lloyd and the rest of the group, Lester, Jesse, Rip, Frank, Alphas and some I'm sure I can't remember started the war. That is what it sounded like. Most got their limits. As I said, I got five. Pretty good for the first time, I thought.

I recall an opening day near Portales, NM when I killed almost as many rattlesnakes as I did doves. I was hunting with Winston Ford, the athletic director at Eastern New Mexico University. He was nailed as he reached down to pick up a dove. I rushed him to what pretended to be a hospital. Thankfully, it was not a bad bite, not much venom injected and they handled it.

There was a shoot down in Mississippi hosted by their fish and game department. Birds everywhere and I needed only 18 shots to get my limit. It is possible that field may have been baited but I wouldn't swear to it. Some folks just plant wheat that way.

There were the great hunts at Wade Bourne's house near Clarksville, complete with fantastic food, some of which I cooked, and enough birds to suit everyone. I usually shot my Remington 870, 20-gauge on those hunts. Good shooting, good food, good companions.

Funny how the action always picks up just as the sun starts to go down and when you go to pick up a bird, another one flies over you.

There was the day it rained. We were in central Louisiana on the Cane River. The big field was behind the restored plantation house and there must have been 50 hunters. At five minutes until noon, the skies opened. It rained as only it can in Louisiana. We were all soaked but still the birds flew.

There was the hunt near Paris when I shared a shooting stake with Hank Williams Jr. He outshot me even with only one eye. However, not by much. I still run into him from time to time, usually in airports as we go various places. Last time we were going hunting, he for elk, and me for deer. Pretty good wingshot, ole Junior.

In addition, there have been some good shoots here on the Old Hickory WMA. That was years ago. I do not go much anymore. Just lost interest, I guess. I don't know if I'll go tomorrow or not. Either way, dove season opens tomorrow at noon and the limit and possession limit for that day is 15.

Hunt safely, wear sunscreen and shoot well.

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