

Backyard Briefs

A weekly column

By Judy Jessop, A Nature Conservancy Volunteer

My home office window peers out on a wooded backyard that at present is a kaleidoscope of fall color. The late afternoon sunlight adds a glowing dappled texture and birds zip from my feeders pulling my eyes with them into the woods. Six mourning doves, lined up along a reaching dogwood limb will soon descend on whistling wings to my patio strewn with ground seed. We enjoy much larger numbers of them now, as they migrate southward to escape the short, chill days further north.

The mourning dove, a member of the pigeon family, is the most widespread game bird in North America. They have adapted to almost every terrain—from mountain to valley, both forest and prairie, and from semi-desert to wetland conditions. During summer these birds range from southeastern Alaska, throughout Canada, can be found in every continental U.S. state, Mexico, west Panama, the Greater Antilles and the Bahamas. Though a few will try to remain further north throughout winter, most migrate to live in the lower half of the U.S. and south to Cuba. These gray-brown birds are 11 to 13 inches long and almost half of that length is a long streamlined tail, fringed in white. Their low sad cooing song (oo-ah! cooo-cooo-cooo), mistaken for an owl by some, is the reason for the bird's name—"mourning" dove. Check this web site for pictures and a recording of their call (<http://birds.cornell.edu/BOW/MOUDOV/>).

Though these birds are commonplace and plentiful they are nonetheless unusual, from simply the way they drink water to the remarkable way they nourish their young. Mourning doves are seedeaters and need plenty of water to soften the hard dry food they eat. Unlike most birds that must lift their head to swallow liquid, these thirsty birds drink by sucking up the water with their bill submerged, like a horse. Such an adaptation allows them to drink large amounts of water quickly and be on their way to foraging for more seed.

In my opinion however, the most amazing adaptation in these birds is their ability to produce bird milk. In mourning doves it is known as "pigeons milk" and it is an ability members of the seed-eating pigeon family have developed to solve the problem of providing adequate protein and fat to developing chicks. I look forward to sharing this story in the next column.