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## : Bird Brief :

### ***Mourning Dove* (*Zenaida macroura*)**

**ORDER:** Columbiformes (2 Families)

**FAMILY:** Columbidae (353 Species)

A few years ago, a flower box on my deck was chosen by a breeding pair of Mourning Doves. They had two clutches and returned the following year to have another clutch. Learning about them during their courtship, nesting, and parenting was a real joy. Mourning Doves are creatures of habit, devoted to each other, and are excellent parents.

I had never had a nesting pair of birds on my deck before. So, I was excited to see a frequently returning Mourning Dove perched on my balcony. I started to pay more attention to see if a breeding pair was looking for a nesting site. Then I noticed a male performing his courtship routine of aerial displays, head bobbing, and of course, cooing his mournful song around a female nearby. After a few days, the pair began inspecting nesting sites and determined my flower box was the best. I knew this because the male brought little twigs for the female to make a loosely woven nest. The male even jumped on her back while she organized the twigs. Once the nest was finished, the female returned that night to lay her first egg. The following morning, she laid her final egg.

I noticed a dove on the nest constantly, all day and night, and wondered if there was ever a time the nesting parent left the nest. Since Mourning Doves are barely sexually dimorphic, I couldn't tell if one or both parents incubated the eggs. Additionally, I knew that Mourning Doves can store abundant food in their crop, but enough for days on end? Then, one mid-morning, I heard the characteristic call, "hoo-WOO-hoo, hoo, hoo," from the male perched on the rooftop of the building next door. He sang for several minutes then flew to my balcony. I saw the male wait patiently for the female to leave the nest and he quickly moved onto the eggs to continue incubating. Another day during the nesting, I was making dinner and spotted a Mourning Dove on the same rooftop where I had seen the male perched singing. After watching for several minutes, this dove flew to my balcony. This time, the female waited for the male to leave the nest. I had no idea that the female incubated during the night and the male returned in the morning for the day shift. How



**July 25, 2019**  
Egg Size: 22 x 28 mm



**July 27, 2019**





August 3, 2019



August 5, 2019



August 8, 2019

fascinating! After observing the pair, I learned that the male performed the cooing, had a longer tail, and grayer head and the female was smaller, had a shorter tail, and had a more cinnamon colored head.

The pair diligently incubated the eggs for around 2 weeks until the babies, or squabs, hatched. Their eyes were closed and they were sparsely covered in downy feathers. The squabs quickly learned to place their heads inside the parent's mouth to receive food. Mourning Doves are unique in that they can suck up fluids instead of cupping fluids in their bill. This allows the dove to drink more fluids and drink faster. A Mourning Dove can drink up to 15% body weight which may be necessary if they forage more for drier seeds. However, if they forage for more fruits, less fluid is required. At any rate, the squabs were fed **crop milk**, produced from the sloughed lining of the adults crop, several times daily for the first week. This specialized milk is high in fat, protein, immune-boosting components, and antioxidants. The parents started diminishing the frequency of feeding and began introducing seeds mixed with the crop milk by the second week. The development of the squabs feathers was also interesting to watch. The downy feathers transitioned into what looked like featherless shafts before changing to short, dark gray, bronze-tipped feathers by two weeks of age. When they fledged, they flew or glided down six floors to the alleyway. Their short tail prevented them from a graceful first flight. The parents were constantly around over the next couple of weeks to protect them and periodically feed them. It was a delight to watch this Mourning Dove pair have clutches of babies.



#### References:

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