

# Winter Bird Survey 2004

Dove Reports Increasing,  
Involvement Is Too

By Jenny Thom

When the air turns brisk and snow blankets the ground, birds begin congregating at backyard buffets of black-oil sunflower seed, suet cakes and other treats. Humans, who cater these feasts, enjoy watching the playful, feisty, and sometimes gluttonous, visitors. Many Oklahoma bird-feeder caterers take bird viewing one step further and contribute to science by participating in the annual Winter Bird Survey.

Oklahoma residents help state biologists track the upward and downward trends in bird appearances at winter feeders. Bird populations vary from year to year, and by gauging changes, the survey helps biologists recognize if fluctuations are normal, point to range expansions or contractions, and warn of potential conservation problems.

Participant Jana Wilson of Choctaw has contributed to the survey for eight years. She enjoys watching the congenial guests that visit her family's feeders. "We love doing this," Wilson wrote on the 2004 survey form, "they [the birds] are our friends and much of our entertainment."

The Wilson Family isn't alone in their bird-feeding fondness. Participation in last year's survey increased from 146 to 406 households, with a 13-percent increase in the number of new people recording winter-feeder trends.

Observer Jack Bass of Sapulpa has been feeding the birds since 1973. Last winter, he saw and reported the fewest birds ever. He was not the only participant to wonder where they all went. The decrease is related to last winter's brief and mild visit. On average, each feeder saw three fewer birds than during the winter of 2003. If the ground is free of snow and ice, local avian are able to find more naturally occurring food and consequentially, show up in fewer numbers at feeders.

Oklahomans continue to ensure winter birds have plenty of feasting locations regardless of snowfall. With a total of 36,751 birds reported, it's evident that birds dine at feeders even when food is available elsewhere.

The most abundant species seen continues to be the American goldfinch. The goldfinch has repeatedly ranked first or second since the survey began in 1987. The house sparrow rose from its fourth-place position in 2003 to the second most plentiful in 2004. Another non-native bird, the starling, rose from eighth place to fourth.

Upon first glance, it appears the populations of these suburban-dwelling residents may be rising. However, an increase in suburban survey contributors (27 percent to 35 percent) helps to explain the higher incidence of house sparrows and starlings reported.

#### Heralding the Arrival of Doves

Survey results indicate a population increase for several dove species in Oklahoma. Like the Eurasian collared dove, which was added to the survey last year, reports indicate the upward swing of another new species - the Inca dove. Feeder locations from seven counties reported a total of 32 Inca doves as write-ins.

Gene Potts lives in Albany near the Red River and the Texas border. He wrote the Wildlife Department about "unusual" doves feeding in his yard. They were much smaller than either the mourning or the Eurasian collared dove. Scalloped plumage gave them an almost scaly appearance. When they flew, he could see conspicuous chestnut colored wing patches. They made soft coo-cooing sounds. Potts had Inca doves.

"I first saw them early last winter after the pecans fell. All kinds of birds were eating the pecans, and I noticed these little doves with red wing spots," Potts said.

Potts fed the Inca doves pecans all winter. They disappeared during the spring, but he reported seeing them again in August scavenging through corn stubble on his property. He also has seen a flock of eight to 10 at a

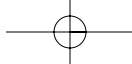
**"My Dad, Isaac 'Ike' Ratcliff, age 88, resides in the Community Care Center in Wilburton, OK. His grandson David Hall is an avid sportsman and thought it might be nice for his Papaw to be involved in the wildlife survey. Dad has a feeder and birdbath outside his window and enjoys the birds he sees. It really pleased him to participate in the survey."**

**— Betty Hall  
Wilburton, OK**

ROBERT TITUS

#### **Top Ten Species Reported in 2004 As reported by 406 participants**

<b>American Goldfinch</b>	<b>5,280</b>
<b>House Sparrow</b>	<b>4,045</b>
<b>Cardinal</b>	<b>2,834</b>
<b>Starling</b>	<b>2,730</b>
<b>Dark-eyed Junco</b>	<b>2,470</b>
<b>Mourning Dove</b>	<b>1,909</b>
<b>House Finch</b>	<b>1,578</b>
<b>Red-winged Blackbird</b>	<b>1,497</b>
<b>Carolina Chickadee</b>	<b>1,409</b>
<b>Blue Jay</b>	<b>1,349</b>



**“The mourning doves are like chickens in a way. They hang around and wait for me to put out food.”**

**— Warren Green  
Westville, OK**



PHOTO COURTESY WILDLIFE DEPARTMENT

**Mourning Dove**



PHOTO COURTESY TEXAS PARKS & WILDLIFE DEPT. BOB FRANK ADLINA

**Inca Dove**

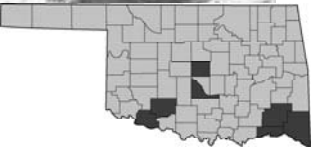


PHOTO COURTESY TEXAS PARKS & WILDLIFE DEPT. BOB FRANK NOTTINGHAM

**White-winged Dove**

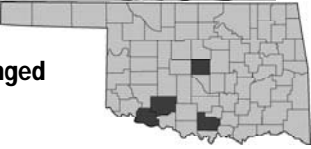
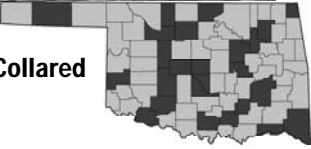


PHOTO COURTESY MISSOURI DEPT. OF CONSERVATION

**Eurasian Collared Dove**



Doves are strong flyers, prolific breeders and seed eaters so they come to feeders and prosper living alongside humans. The Eurasian collared, Inca and white-winged dove have been appearing in Oklahoma, and populations are on the increase according to results of the Wildlife Department's annual Winter Bird Survey. Get involved during the next

neighbor's home and said other neighbors are seeing them as well. "I only see them around people – that must be their ace in the hole," he said.

David Arbour, a naturalist at Red Slough Wildlife Management Area, says Potts is right.

"Inca doves are adapted to urban areas. They eat seeds and fruits. Bird feeders help them survive and yard plantings are attractive to them. They are especially fond of nesting in privet thickets, particularly overgrown ones," Arbour said.

They are usually seen in pairs, but during the winter gather in large flocks. Arbour has seen clusters of twenty Inca doves stacked two rows high. The top row of birds literally perches atop the bottom row to conserve heat. He's seen photos of them huddling in three-row pyramids.

Inca doves used to be a Mexican species until the early 1900s when they began spreading into Texas and other states such as Arizona and New Mexico. Arbour has found breeding colonies throughout Arkansas. He occasionally finds Inca doves around Red Slough and reports they are well established in Oklahoma at Eagletown and Broken Bow. The first reported nest in Oklahoma was discovered in Hugo three years ago.

The birds are becoming more plentiful because they are occupying an empty ecological niche created by man according Arbour.

"Man has created an environment with exotic plantings and bird feeders that these suburban birds can move into and take over without having anything else to compete with," he said.

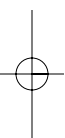
Wildlife Department Biologist Mark Howerly expects Inca doves to soon fill the entire Red River Valley area and continue expanding north.

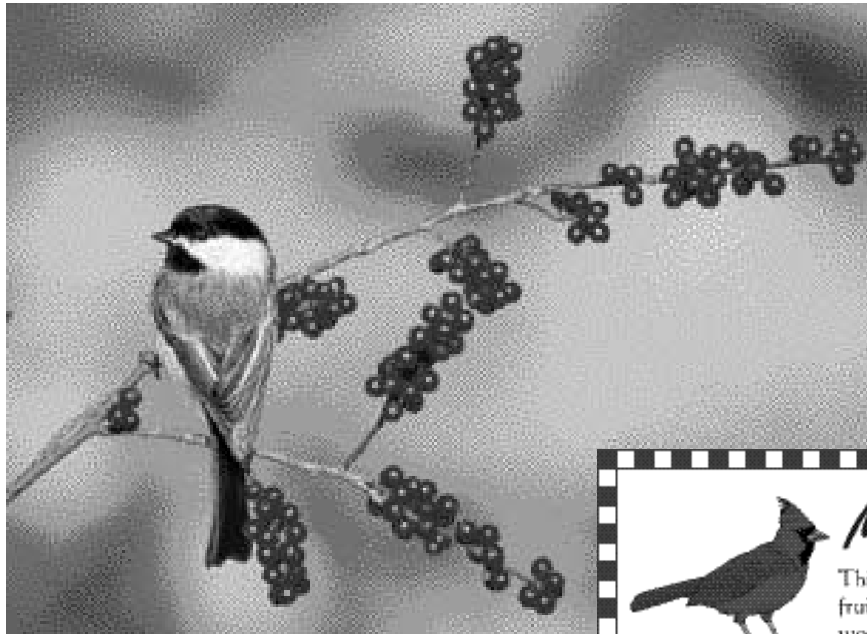
"I've received reports of multiple sightings from Norman, Purcell and Oklahoma City. These are early colonies, though, not established populations," he said.

A recent sighting by Forrest Berrett of Moore indicates they may be starting to establish colonies in central Oklahoma. Berrett regularly watches them feeding on wild bird seed in his neighbor's back yard, but he first noticed them in August when two swept across the path of his pick-up truck.

"You can tell they're doves, but they look different – they catch your eye," Berrett said. "The feathers reminded me of fish scales, and when I saw the red, I knew I was seeing something new to Oklahoma."

**Astounding Increase in Eurasian Collared Doves**





JOHN RING

The mild winter last year left plenty of natural food available for Oklahoma's winter birds. Even so, there were no shortages of Carolina chickadees at feeders. Survey sightings increased .5 percent and the chickadee ranked in the

Populations of Eurasian collared dove have made a striking increase. A scattering of six survey participants first reported seeing a total of 13 Eurasian collared doves in 2002. Eight different locations reported being visited by the dove in 2003. In 2004, participants in 26 counties noticed the dove and reported a total of 453 individuals.

This is impressive, considering biologists suspect Eurasian collared doves have been in Oklahoma little more than a decade, if that long. The species is known for its rapid proliferation and adaptability. During the 1900s, the dove spread from the subcontinent of India throughout Europe. Sometime in the early 1980s, it was released in the Bahamas and made its way to the Florida Coast. Finding a niche wherever people are present, it has been spreading northwest throughout the southern half of North America.

Some of the increase in 2004 reports of Eurasian collared doves can be attributed to awareness. Constance Parish of McAlester (Pittsburg County) thought she had seen an albino mourning dove in 2003. After reading about the dove in last year's Winter Bird Survey results, Parish realized what she had seen.

Gene Potts had heard the Eurasian collared dove calling in Bryan County for several years but had not seen it until last year.

"I kept hearing these calls, and I thought it was what they call a rain crow [yellow-billed cuckoo]. Then I was talking to a neighbor, and he showed me it wasn't a crow making the call but this white dove bird. When I read the article in *Outdoor Oklahoma*, I realized what I had been seeing and hearing for the past three to four years," he said.

Further north in Oklahoma County, Forrest Berrett saw the Eurasian collared dove for the first time this year.

"At first I assumed it was a released pet until I saw another one gathering grass and carrying it to a tree for a nest," he said.

Another New Dove?



## Miracle Meal Recipe

This tasty treat is sure to entice birds that eat fruit and insects. It is likely to attract bluebirds, woodpeckers, titmice, chickadees, nuthatches, cardinals, blue jays and mockingbirds.

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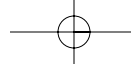
What you need: flour, yellow cornmeal, lard [not shortening], peanut butter or unsalted, crushed peanuts [optional], raisins [optional], an old log, a drill.

1. Mix 1 part flour to 3 parts cornmeal and 2 parts lard.
2. Add peanut butter or unsalted, crushed peanuts [optional]
3. Add raisins [optional]
4. Roll mixture into firm balls.
5. Drill 1-1/2 inch holes into the log.
6. Stuff the holes with the miracle meal mixture.
7. Suspend the log from a tree limb.
8. Watch for birds.

This recipe adapted from Jack Terres' book *Songbirds In Your Garden*.

### Unusual Visitors

- Varied Thrush, Garfield County
- Red Crossbill, Comanche County
- Rufous Hummingbird, Comanche County
- Scaled Quail, Texas County
- Curve-billed Thrasher, Texas County
- Albino Goldfinch, Atoka County
- Mountain Bluebird, Ellis County
- Lewis's Woodpecker, Caddo County



The Eurasian collared dove and Inca dove may soon find themselves sharing space with yet another dove species beginning to appear in Oklahoma – the white-winged dove. The white-winged dove is expanding north out of Texas and appearing in low numbers in Oklahoma and Arkansas. A total of five birds were reported from four counties as write-ins on the 2004 survey.

Like the Eurasian collared and Inca, the white-winged inhabits man-made niches and also feeds on grain and wild seeds, as well as cactus fruits and blossoms. Similar in size to a mourning dove - although slightly larger and stockier with a shorter tail - it is recognizable by bold, white wing patches and a drawn-out, variable, who-cooks-for-you call.

Naturalist Arbour said “they’re showing up where collared doves are and mixing with them. While the two species may compete for habitat, they don’t appear to be interbreeding.”

Arbour says there is no fear of either species interbreeding with the much smaller Inca dove.

“Incas are in a class all of their own. Although the white-winged, Eurasian and Inca doves are filling a similar niche, they don’t appear to be in major competition with one another,” he said.

Mark Howery has spent a lifetime following Oklahoma’s birds and feels these immigrants pose no threat to native bird species either.

“The effect on resident bird populations is unknown, but in north Texas where they’ve been established for two decades, these species have settled around neighborhoods and farmsteads – areas highly modified by people. They’re not settling in the prairies or deep in the woods. They’re not competing with most of our native bird populations,” he said.

Some wonder why these species are spreading across Oklahoma neighborhoods. The expansions may be related to natural climate trends. Oklahoma winters have been relatively mild over the past decade. While milder seasons do play a role in bird survival through the winter, it also seems to be the nature of these doves to proliferate and expand their ranges. As Arbour pointed out, as long as there are suburban areas, there will be a niche for these human-attuned doves.

It may be a few years before white-winged doves become prevalent in Oklahoma, but the Inca dove is close on the tail feather of the Eurasian collared dove. The Inca dove has been added to the 2005 Winter Bird Survey. Biologists have not added the white-winged dove to the survey, but participants are encouraged to note any feeder occurrences.

Contribute to scientific history. Help biologists follow the Eurasian collared, white-winged and Inca dove as they spread through the state. Relax in a seat by the window and grab your Winter Bird Survey form. Choose two days during the Jan. 13 - 16 survey period to watch, enjoy and record the birds visiting your feeders this winter. 🌿

**“The exciting sighting this winter has been the regular visits of a pileated woodpecker to the suet feeders. It is great to watch such a magnificent woodpecker up so close.”**

**— Mary Lou Purdy  
Oklahoma City OK**

