The “dove shoot” tradition of Davis’s era continues to be one of South Carolina’s most popular hunting and social events. When Davis began hunting mourning doves, once known as “Carolina turtle doves,” on Rose Hill Plantation, he admitted that he was hunting to put food on the table and gave little thought to the sporting qualities of wing shooting that now characterize modern recreational “dove shoots.” Davis initially hunted doves with his 14-gauge muzzleloader and periodically borrowed his father’s English-made Charles Daly 12-gauge double breechloader. Around 1906 he began using his own Parker 12-gauge.

Until 1913 there were few state or federal laws that protected doves, and Davis recalled several instances when huge numbers were killed over baited fields. The conduct of modern dove shoots is now governed, in addition to the tenets of good sportsmanship, by federal and state regulations that establish seasons, impose bag limits, and prohibit the application of bait as a lure.

Statewide protection of game and the enforcement of game laws by state game wardens had been in existence only since 1910. By that time Davis recognized their utility in preventing wanton and indiscriminate slaughter. By 1919 South Carolina had adopted federal migratory bird regulations into state law and imposed a ten- to twenty-five-dollar fine for violations.
Davis was a keen observer of the feeding and breeding habits of doves. He noted their migratory patterns and the cyclical nature of their population caused by factors that included changes in local planting practices and catastrophic weather conditions such as occurred in the winter of 1893–94, the great snowstorm of February 1899, and the periods of severe drought in the 1920s. During the 1920s the state permitted a three-and-a-half-month-long dove season beginning in September and with a bag limit of twenty-five per day.

He recalled that in the early 1890s a few passenger pigeons were still seen flying among flocks of mourning doves and that one he bagged in 1895 while it sat in a tree may have been the last one ever shot in Williamsburg County. The last authenticated record of a live sighting of a passenger pigeon was in March 1900, and the last known bird of that species died in the Cincinnati Zoo in 1914.

In my early boyhood, by far the most abundant game bird in the low-country was the mourning, Carolina, or turtle dove, as it is variously called. Few, if any, persons of the present generation have any conception of the vast multitudes of these birds that in those days were found in that section during the winter season. Then practically every cornfield on the small farms as well as on the large plantations was planted in cowpeas, and most of the crops were unharvested so as to furnish a bountiful supply of food in the fields for the owners’ hogs and cows that were turned out to forage therein. To these pea fields great hordes of doves flocked, as they found there in abundance both corn and peas, the two foods they prefer perhaps above all others.

The greatest concentration of doves I have ever seen was in a twenty-acre corn and pea field on the Hamer plantation east of the highway from Lane to Kingstree, South Carolina, now State Highway No. 377, and about a mile south of Black River. The field had produced a bountiful crop of peas, and they had not been picked. I happened to ride by there in a buggy in the late fall and was simply amazed at the great number of doves that were in evidence on every hand. The trees in and around the field, the gum saplings along its ditch banks, and the ground of the field itself literally swarmed with them. I had no means of estimating their numbers, but
I hazard the guess that probably as many as two thousand doves had con-
gregated in that one comparatively small area. So far as I know, these doves
were never molested as very few people hunted them at that time. When
I saw them I was returning home from a trip to Kingstree, the county seat,
and had no gun with me and had no good excuse to go after them the next
day, although I had permission to hunt the property on which they were
located. This location was about two miles from our own corn and pea
fields, which at the same time were teeming with doves. Since we had more
doves on our own property than I could possibly shoot, it was not at all
necessary to hunt them on the neighbor’s property.

On our plantation, large fields stretched away northward from the resi-
dence for a distance of more than a half mile, and in these fields were
branches that were filled with both saplings and trees that afforded favorite
resting places for doves. However, when I was quite a small boy the prin-
cipal resting places were two very large black walnut trees growing about
125 yards apart on a ridge running east and west in the middle of the field
and about a quarter of a mile north of the residence. On a cold, rainy day
in midwinter I have seen both of these trees so thickly crowded with rest-
ing doves that it seemed that neither tree could hold another bird. The
eastern of these two trees was blasted by lightning just about the time I
learned to shoot. My chums and I killed a great many doves from the west-
er tree, which was located about 45 yards from a ditch, and for some time
I used this ditch as a blind. However, the range was rather long for my old
muzzleloader on single birds, and I missed many of them. On the other
hand, if I got a large flock closely settled on my side of the tree, I could
usually kill several birds with one shot even from the ditch. But to be more
certain of making kills on singles, I built a blind some 10 or 15 yards nearer
to the tree and used it after that with much better results. When a friend
was shooting with me, we used two blinds located on opposite sides of the
tree and operated under an agreement to shoot only the birds that perched
on the respective sides of the tree.

In the first field north of the residence grew another huge black walnut
tree with wide-spreading branches. One clear, cold winter day I saw this
tree literally covered with a drove of sitting doves that numbered, I would
say, some four or five hundred birds. I picked up my father’s bird gun, a
Charles Daly 12-gauge double breechloader with twenty-eight-inch open
bored barrels, and placed in each barrel a heavy load of No. 5’s. Gun in
hand I then crawled to a clump of bushes on the edge of the yard standing
seventy-five yards from the walnut tree. This was as near as I could approach, so from such position I fired one shot into the thickest mass of sitting birds. At such extreme range, I killed three birds that I retrieved. This was one of the longest shots I ever made with a shotgun on small game.

When doves were congregating of their own accord in the western walnut tree above mentioned, I could generally get good shooting by sitting in my blind and waiting for them to come in to it. To get best results, however, at all times a driver was essential. We usually used as a driver a small Negro boy mounted on a mule to ride around and flush a flock that had settled in a field. If the driver kept the birds in the air and remained at a good distance from their resting tree, the birds would fly to it. The very best time to kill doves by driving was a cold, drizzly winter day, as they seemed to congregate better in such weather. I saw an uncle of mine on such a day kill five birds the first shot he fired into a flock that settled in close formation in the resting tree after his driver had flushed them from the fields.

On the last drive hunt for doves in which I participated, I used a rifle chambered for the .22 caliber long rifle cartridge and shot only hollow point loads. I was down on the plantation and found a pea field belonging to my brother, which was overrun with doves. After flushing a few, I found they were alighting in clumps of young oaks growing along the edge of the woods. So I had him saddle his horse and agree to keep the doves flying by continually riding along the edge of the field farthest from my position in a blind near the young oaks. By this method I killed around a dozen doves that afternoon as they came in and perched.

I must confess that in my young days I was a meat hunter and not a sportsman where doves were concerned. Precious few did I ever kill on the wing, and as a matter of fact I did not particularly care about shooting a single either sitting or flying. I suppose killing several at a shot by shooting into a crowded bunch of sitting birds just spoiled me. One of our largest fields had been the old Negro “street” in the days of slavery, and on the numerous old house sites therein cotton plants grew tall and rank. In the winter season, if a large flock of doves was chased out of a pea field, the birds would almost invariably take refuge in this cotton field. To have them do this was all to my liking. As soon as they were well settled, I would sneak across the cotton rows near their location, and when I caught a nice group bunched together, resting or searching for food on the ground, I would fire into them. Generally this netted me one or two birds. While I
liked to kill several at a shot, I never strove for big bags. When I killed what I deemed a good mess of birds, I quit and went home.

I never had much success stalking doves except in one particular locality. The northern boundary of the field farthest from our residence was a deep ditch. Beyond the ditch was an abandoned field that was heavily grown with young pines and clumps of sweet gum saplings. When routed from the neighboring fields, doves frequently filled up the tops of these saplings. This gave a perfect setup for a stalk, as many of the clumps were within thirty yards of the ditch, which was usually dry. When the birds were all nicely settled in the sapling, I eased down to the place where the ditch entered the swamp, which was several hundred yards from the resting birds, got into the ditch, and walked it until I got opposite their position. Then I poured a load of No. 7’s into the assembled drove with good results for my game bag but disastrous results to the doves. I pulled this stunt several times in a single season.

For doves I always preferred No. 7 shot, as they killed much better than smaller sizes. A dove is exceedingly tenacious of life and though mortally wounded will keep flying and perching until it is lost beyond any hope of being retrieved. I have seen many thus escape even though pierced by a solid bullet from a .22 caliber long rifle cartridge.

In the early 1890s frequently a few passenger pigeons were found associating with the flocks of doves on the plantations in our section. One season during this period our nearest neighbor, who hunted a great deal, killed several of these pigeons that were consorting with doves.

I killed, so far as I can learn, the last passenger pigeon ever shot in Williamsburg County. As I recall, this was in the late fall of 1895. When I discovered this bird, it was perched on a dead snag at the top of a big tree on the edge of the swamp. I tried to stalk it but failed, as it flew and crossed a field to alight on a dead limb in the top of a large sweet gum tree growing in a branch we had under fence as a pasture. The rail pasture fence ran within thirty yards of the gum tree, so I got behind it and sneaked and crawled for several hundred yards until I got within easy range of the sitting bird. I then killed it instantly. When I fired, I thought my target was a hawk and had no idea I was shooting a pigeon, but when I picked up my kill, I knew that was what I had. I had previously discussed with our neighbor the birds of this species he had killed in previous seasons and had heard the passenger pigeon frequently discussed and described by the older citizens of the community who knew it intimately in the days of its
abundance. So identifying the bird I had killed presented no difficulty. It had the general appearance of a mourning dove but was much larger and handsomer and was in no way to be confused with that common bird. It might be described briefly as a magnified and glorified mourning dove.

In my late teens a diminution in the numbers of mourning doves wintering in our section had become apparent. I attribute this principally to the severe weather of several of the preceding winters. The winter of 1893–94 was especially hard on doves, and many of them perished. The winter of 1898–99 was even worse. In February 1894 we had a heavy snow that was followed by sleet and rain that froze as it fell. The combination of snow and ice stayed on the ground for two weeks, something unusual for our section of the country. After the ice storm I ventured out on a hunt for doves and killed a few. These were shot in a cornfield and could scarcely fly, as their tails were coated with ice formed from the rain that had fallen on them while on the roost. When I went to the house to get warm and reported the conditions, my father made me put up my gun and leave the doves alone until better weather prevailed. Later I learned that on the same day, in a cornfield a few miles away, two men armed with nothing but dogwood yard brooms had killed over seventy of these ice-coated doves. How many of these birds perished from various causes during this unprecedented spell of weather will never be known, but I know the losses were very severe.

In the winter of 1898–99 the doves took another severe beating. On February 11–12, 1899, fell one of the heaviest snows in the history of our section, and on February 14, 1899, the thermometer dropped to zero, the record minimum for such section. Doves suffered as a consequence just as they had suffered five years before, and as the weather was colder, the losses may have been heavier. The weather was so cold I did no hunting during this spell. In fact, I had no will to hunt and take advantage of the helpless feathered creatures that were having a sufficiently hard time without any assistance from me. On this occasion I saw a lone dove come on the back porch of our home seeking food and shelter. We gave it food and water, but it was found dead the next morning under the porch steps where it had taken refuge for the night and had frozen to death. I heard of similar instances at other farm homes. At that time I had a martin house mounted on a tall cypress pole in the backyard, and when I took it down the next spring it contained the skeletons of forty-five bluebirds that had been frozen in that little box during the preceding winter.
During this cold spell a large flock of doves resorted to a long row of haystacks adjacent to the horse lot of one of our neighbors. The stacks were of pea vine hay, and they were seeking peas for food. He cleared off a space at the end of the stacks and put out a supply of corn and peas. From a nearby blind he soon killed with a shotgun a large bag of doves at the bait and then left the others to enjoy the food he had placed for them. This is the only report I had of the shooting of doves on this particular snow.

Only a few years ago a shoot was held in Florence County when a heavy snowfall lay on the ground; it was a veritable shambles for doves. A small field had been planted in corn and Biloxi soybeans, and the beans had not been harvested. In this small field hundreds of doves had congregated, and when the snow fell and covered it, they still went there in search of food. When it began to thaw and doves began to pour in by swarms, it was to find the field surrounded by gunners who mowed them down without let or hindrance. When the shooting was over, hundreds of birds had been killed and the flock that frequented the field had been practically wiped out.

The last great concentration of doves I have seen was probably twenty-five years ago. Fronting on Great Pee Dee River swamp, about a mile above the Atlantic Coast Line Railroad tracks in Florence County, were large fields planted in soybeans. The river swamp to the east of these fields was heavily timbered and constituted the lower part of the Pearce preserve. As I hunted through it on this occasion, I found hundreds of resting doves in the great gums and oaks growing there. I was hunting wild turkeys and made no efforts to shoot any of these doves. When on the trail of such royal game as the wild turkey, no real turkey hunter will turn aside to waste time and effort on smaller stuff. When you find a fellow who will so condescend, mark him off your list of turkey hunters, as he does not belong there.

Before the timber was cut on the Pearce preserve and its thousands of acres converted into a wilderness of cat claw briars and canes, doves in great numbers frequented certain sections of the property as regular feeding grounds. This was particularly true of the wide, open sweet gum flats that abounded in certain areas. They seemed to have a special fondness for the mast or seed of the sweet gum. I killed a number of doves from flocks that were so feeding and also from those that were congregating around a favorite watering pond in midafternoon. Even after timber operations
were well under way, I killed many doves both on timbered and cutover areas. One afternoon in a cutover section, I killed five in a few minutes as they kept flying to a resting tree I had located.

One peculiar habit of the dove is that of going each day to a particular water hole to drink, even if water is abundant elsewhere. At one artesian well in the edge of the river swamp, I killed a quantity of doves one season when there was no earthly reason for them to keep coming there day by day, as water was by no means scarce in the swamp.

Very few are they who know it, but the fact is that most of the doves that now winter in the lowcountry are migrants from the North. During the last half of February, if the weather is not too cold, our native birds begin to return from the South, and by the end of March the return migration is usually complete. On such return, these birds spread all over the pine ridge sections of Great Pee Dee River swamp and its adjacent highland and set up their housekeeping. Their plaintive calls are among the most abundant bird notes then heard in that extensive region. While the breeding birds are more abundant in the area described, they are found all over the wooded portions of the county. I live on a two-acre lot in a city, and last spring a male for days sang his song every morning on my premises. I know a nest was nearby, but I never found it. A few years ago a pair nested in a bush beside the steps at one of the entrances to the TB Sanitorium located a few miles from the city limits of Florence.

They rear their young, sometimes several broods in a season, and by September both young and old birds are thronging the telephone and light wires that thread the countryside. The fields and woods contain them in fair numbers, and every indication is that when the winter season comes a good supply of birds will be on hand. By October 15th all this has changed. Wires, fields, and woods are all bare of doves save for a few stragglers. The migratory urge has seized them, and all of our native doves are then in South Georgia, Alabama, and Mississippi, and our section will see no more flocks until the northern birds begin to come in after killing frosts. This may explain the great scarcity of doves during the winter season in the lowcountry at the present day. I have not killed a half-dozen doves in the past five years, as there were none here to kill. Eight years ago they could be found in considerable numbers in pea or soybean fields, and I killed quite a few at such feeding grounds. For the past five seasons, however, the best of the old feeding fields, even though full of soybeans, have not yielded a single bird. Eight years ago there were twenty times as many
doves in Florence County, South Carolina, as were there last year; and the same thing held true throughout the lowcountry. On our old Rose Hill Plantation in Williamsburg County, South Carolina, there were practically no doves during such period. Fields there that harbored hundreds of doves sixty years before did not harbor a single bird last winter until our native birds began to return on the approach of spring.

We have absolutely no control over the conditions that affect our winter migrant doves when they return to their northern breeding grounds. If such conditions are unfavorable in spring and summer, a bountiful supply of birds will not winter in our fields it matters not how well they are supplied with suitable food. These are the facts we must face, and I am not sufficiently optimistic to believe that we shall ever again see in this part of the country a plentiful supply of doves in the winter season.

Until outlawed by statute, the shooting of doves around baited fields was a common practice in certain sections of this state. This was particularly true in the middle and upper tiers of counties. The selected fields were heavily strewn with grain, such as corn, wheat, cowpeas, and soybeans. Granulated rock salt was also extensively used. A bountiful supply of the bait was kept on the ground at all times, and it attracted and held vast quantities of doves, the numbers sometimes running into thousands if the baited field was a large one. On certain set days, regular shoots were held for fee-paying gunners, who were stationed around the perimeter of the field. In the course of the season, thousands of birds were slaughtered at such shoots.

Judged by the antics of an old lovesick male dove in the spring, no one would ever suspect the real powers of flight he possesses. He will sit by his mate on a limb cooing in his very best style, then suddenly launch out and sail around a long circuit and return to his perch without once flapping his wings. This is done, so it is said, to impress his mate. Whether this be so or not, the impression made on an observer is that in the air he is but a lumbering laggard of the same class as a marsh hen. Nothing could be further from the truth, as the dove is a veritable speed demon if the occasion demands it. An unfrightened dove in regular flight presents no problem to a good wing shot. The flight is level, steady, and even and not unusually fast. But with a frightened dove it is another story. Fright can put him in the same speed class as the teal duck and can make him put on some fancy tricks, twists, turns, and maneuvers that the teal has not yet mastered. One of the fastest birds on the wing in pursuit is the Cooper’s
hawk, yet I have seen an adult dove outdistance this hawk in a straight-away race. The success of this hawk depends on his initial impetuous onslaught, which is made at incredible speed, but unless the selected dove is captured in such onslaught, my belief is that he will escape. Few, if any, doves are taken if given, before the hawk strikes, a chance to throw the throttle wide open with a full head of steam. The dove’s sustained power of flight is superior to that of the hawk.

Fright, however, is not the only thing that will cause a dove to give marvelous exhibitions of speed and mastery of the air. A hungry flock zooming over high trees and downward into its feeding field in search of an early breakfast usually comes as if driven by an order for full speed ahead. In like maneuver does a flock rush by when they have behind them a strong tail wind. Taking birds from flocks of either class requires good wing shooting, and it becomes tougher when the flocks have been broken up and the individual birds have been thoroughly frightened.

The artificially baited fields and the great shoots staged thereat are no more, and it is well that they are not. Wing shooting of doves, however, is a fine sport and may be had without the objectionable feature of wanton and indiscriminate slaughter. On many of the larger farms of this section are pea or soybean fields in which fair-sized flocks of doves are to be found, and the owner and his friends surround such fields occasionally during the season and have some real sport, but with due regard to the legal bag limits. This type of hunting prevails, I am informed, in all sections of the state where doves are to be found. The largest kill I ever knew on flying doves by a single hunter was made at a small field of unharvested peas unsupplemented by other food. This individual killed on a winter afternoon with an automatic 12-gauge shotgun eighty-nine single doves on the wing that he retrieved. Kills like this are no longer possible or permissible. A single hunter can at times get good wing shooting on doves if he can locate a line of flight and station himself thereon as they come and go to a field in which they are feeding. He can do the same by going to the water hole they are frequenting.

I cannot subscribe to the doctrine advanced by some that the dove is perfectly harmless. True, he presents all the appearances of childlike innocence, but it is hypocritical. The crow and the lark are universally denounced for their depredations on sprouting corn, but the innocent dove is more destructive than either of them. He does not possess the strong, long bill of the first two mentioned, but he always gets the grain he is after.
by scratching and wallowing it out of the ground—and he will be after plenty of it. In my boyhood I trapped hundreds of larks when they were engaged in pulling up newly sprouted oats and in such traps took a few doves. These traps were made of wooden slats and were of the type known to every country boy. The best size was about twenty-two by twenty-eight inches. Two heavy twenty-eight-inch slats were laid on the ground as sills with a strong loop of cord, preferably hemp, in the middle of each. The free part of the loop was about three inches long. A pyramidal structure was then built up with different lengths of slats to a height of about eight inches, and a top was put on parallel to the two initial ground sills. A stout section was then cut from an oak or hickory sapling and bent across the top with the ends secured by the two loops on the ground sills. This piece of oak or hickory acted as a powerful spring that strongly held the entire structure together. The trap was set by raising up one of its sides and holding it in such position by the famous figure 4 mechanism, which had a long trigger extending into the middle of the ground covered by the trap, and which when touched released the top of the jumper and allowed the trap to fall to the ground. I have caught as many as nine larks at a single fall of a trap of such dimensions. Larks are not fit to eat, as they are both strong flavored and wormy. But this did not bother the little Negroes to whom I gave all I caught. When we found out the value of larks as destroyers of insects, we quit trapping them and sought other means of preventing their depredations on sprouting grain.

It was no trouble to catch a dove in a lark trap, but unless you got there soon you would never get him, as if the ground was not hard he would promptly burrow under the bottom of the trap and escape. Of all the hundreds of birds of different species I trapped in my young days, the dove is the only one that regularly escaped in this manner. Other birds have become frantic when they realized they were imprisoned, but this phlegmatic old cuss never lost his head and proceeded to dig out of his prison.

The dove has afforded me much fine sport, and I trust he will be around during all future years and will not go the way of his kinsman the passenger pigeon.

In closing this chapter, let me pay tribute to the dove as a table delicacy. A rice pilau made of doves and their giblets is as savory a dish as ever graced a table. If you do not believe it, try it and be convinced.