

Earliest Mourning Dove Nest in Illinois

During the first week of February 1995, Jane Friedman called to tell me about a Mourning Dove (*Zenaidura macroura*) nesting in her Chicago backyard. She told me the cup-shaped, mainly mud nest, 20 feet above ground, was 3 feet from the house under an aluminum awning within an urban setting. Mourning Doves typically begin nesting in northeastern Illinois in early May (Hanson and Kossack 1963). The early date prompted me to visit Friedman's home where I confirmed that a Mourning Dove was indeed sitting on two eggs inside a mud-filled cup, a deserted American Robin's nest. To my knowledge, this is the earliest Mourning Dove nest in Illinois.

Friedman said she saw the dove on its nest on 4 Feb. after having heard in January frequent courtship 'cooings' and observing material being added to this former robin's nest. On 11 Feb. I took photographs of the dove on the nest.

Despite daytime temperatures during the first half of February which were well below freezing, a nearly ready-to-fledge Mourning Dove peeked out of the nest on 26 Feb. All the young fledged, although one became dinner for a local cat.

This species typically makes two to three brood attempts per season although six broods have been reported (Ehrlich and Dobkin 1988). Captive and wild dove studies have shown that 30 days is the most frequent time interval between young fledgling and the onset of a new nest (Hanson and Kossack 1963).

Interestingly, two new young were observed in this same nest on 1 April 1996. This would mean eggs would have been laid prior to mid-March since incubation alone takes 14 days (Mirarchi and Baskett 1994). These doves probably started the second nest approximately a week after the first brood fledged.

This nesting cycle continued as two more eggs were laid in the same nest by 20 April and a ready-to-fledge young was seen on 11 May. A fourth attempt in the same nest produced two eggs on 20 May and a hatchling on 10 June. These additional nestings commenced within days of fledging. If these four nestings were by the same pair, it would tie the Illinois record set by a fertile Boone County dove pair in the late 1950s (Hanson and Kossack 1963).

Most Mourning Dove nests in northeastern Illinois start in mid-May with no nest ever found prior to April (Hanson and Kossack 1963 and an author's review of

published Illinois breeding season notes from all issues of *Meadowlark* and *Illinois Birds & Birding*). Despite the paucity of published early breeding records, Vernon Kleen, avian ecologist for the Illinois Department of Natural Resources, said some nests might be started in mid-March in a rare year in extreme southern Illinois. Nesting occurs in late February to early March in southern U.S. latitudes (Mirarchi and Baskett 1994). With the date of this Chicago nesting at least as early as 4 Feb., this may represent the earliest nesting for this species north of the 38 degree latitude.

The same deserted robins' mud nest was reused four consecutive times. The average number of renestings in the same nest is 1.13 in Illinois; the time gap between nestings was several days as compared with the Illinois average of 30 days between nestings (Mirarchi and Baskett 1994). The same pair probably attempted a minimum of four nests. Illinois' average is 2.0. Every nest was successful. Illinois' average nest success rate is 66% (Mirarchi and Baskett 1994). This pair probably produced eight eggs and at least six young fledged. The average number of young fledged per pair is only 2.38 in Illinois; the national average is 3.6 (Mirarchi and Baskett 1994).

Warm temperatures, especially at night, is a significant factor in determining the onset of breeding in Mourning Doves (Mirarchi and Baskett 1994, Hanson and Kossack 1963). The warmest January in Chicago history was 1995. In fact, a warming trend the last week of January put temperatures well above freezing. Whatever the reasons, this pair of Mourning Doves broke most Illinois conventions and expectations regarding its typical breeding cycle.

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Literature Cited

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