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## Shorter Contributions

Gary R. Graves. Late Ground Nesting of Mourning Dove (*Zenaida macroura*) on Assateague Island, Virginia. *Banisteria* 36: 39-40. (2010)

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The journal *Banisteria* is named for John Banister (1650-1692), who was the first university-trained naturalist to work in Virginia.



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LATE GROUND NESTING OF MOURNING DOVE (*ZENAIIDA MACROURA*) ON ASSATEAGUE ISLAND, VIRGINIA. — On 17 September 2009, I observed a pair of nestling Mourning Doves (*Zenaida macroura*) in a ground nest on Assateague Island, Chincoteague National Wildlife Refuge, Accomack County, Virginia. The nestlings, which appeared to be about 10 days old based on the extent of feather sheathing on the head and neck (Hanson & Kossack, 1957), were huddled in a shallow depression in pine needle litter (Fig. 1). The nest site was screened by a thicket of greenbriar (*Smilax* sp.) and shaded by tall loblolly pines (*Pinus taeda*). An irregular ring (ca. 30-35 cm in diameter) of feces around the nestlings indicated that the doves had been present at the site for several days, signifying a ground nest rather than a

post-fledging “reference area” (Grand & Mirarchi, 1988). Ground nesting occurs frequently in open habitats west of the Mississippi River (Cowan, 1952; Howe & Flake, 1989), but it is relatively uncommon in forested regions of eastern North America (Drobney et al., 1998). However, Hon (1956) found a substantial number of ground nests on small islands supporting few trees or mammalian predators off the coast of North Carolina. Ground nesting has been poorly documented in Virginia (Lewis, 1936). Given an incubation period of about 14 days (Hanson & Kossack, 1957), a laying date of 23 August can be inferred for the first egg of the customary two-egg clutch. This constitutes a moderately late date for Virginia and the Delmarva Peninsula (Clapp, 1997; Robbins & Blom, 1997).

One additional point deserves comment. I was struck by the resemblance of the compact nestlings to pine cones that littered the ground. Grayish plumage color and contrasting feather tips effectively mimic



Fig. 1. Nestling Mourning Dove (*Zenaida macroura*) in a ground nest on Assateague Island, Virginia, on 17 September 2009.

the imbricated scales of weathered, unopened cones. Although this highly adaptable species nests in a wide range of habitats in North America that lack pines, this incident suggests that the juvenal plumage may afford good camouflage in pine-dominated habitats.

I thank Roger Clapp for sharing his knowledge of the literature.

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