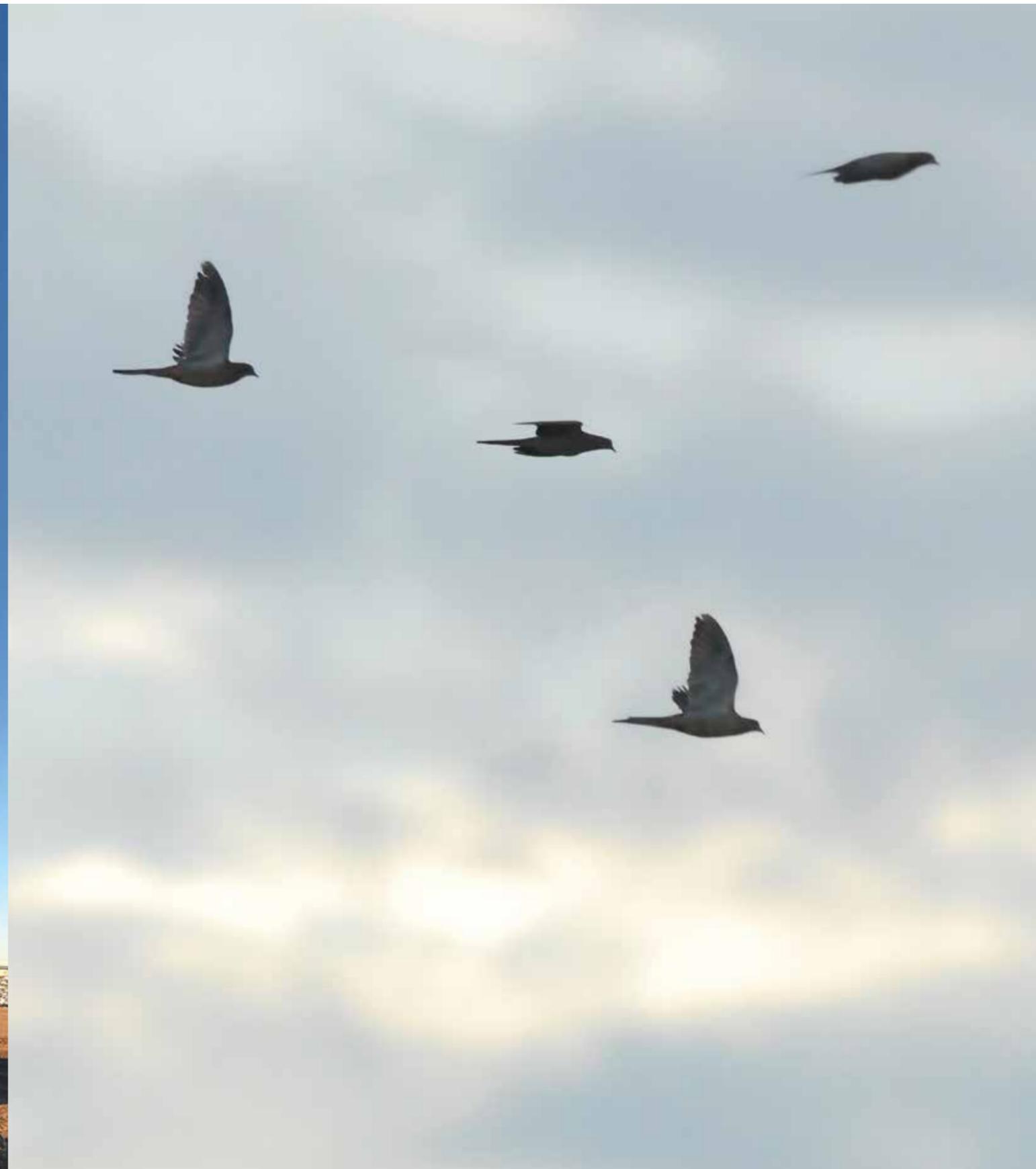


# Doves, a Dairy and My First Hunt

— Story by Amy Gleich —



“I can’t  
do this,”  
I thought.

I looked down at my shotgun, placed carefully on the hay bale in front of me, next to four boxes of shells. The three other hunters in the group were far enough away that my earplugs turned the sounds of their shots into light “pops.” Before heading to their spots, they gave me some last-minute tips and asked if I wanted someone to stay with me. I felt self-conscious with them watching, so I opted to be alone.



# I took a deep breath and looked around.

We were at a dairy in rural Mesa — one of the hunters knew the owner and, after signing releases and providing copies of our drivers' licenses, we were allowed on the property. It's a perfect spot to hunt doves. The surrounding fields give the birds plenty of places to eat, so in the morning and evening thousands fly overhead. I watched the doves for a minute, but soon the dairy cows caught my eye and reminded me of the moment months earlier when hunting finally made sense to me.

I was driving north along I-17, when I passed some cattle being transported. Suddenly it dawned on me... other than growing some herbs or vegetables, I had never played a significant role in harvesting the food I eat. Even more than that — it suddenly seemed much more natural for an animal to live out its life in the wild before becoming my food.

I couldn't believe it, but I wanted to hunt. It was something I never thought I'd do. But what was I going to hunt? When I was a kid my grandpa hunted elk, quail and dove. To be honest, I don't think I'll ever hunt elk and it wasn't quail season. It was dove season, however, and a few friends were heading out for a hunt and let me tag along to observe.



## You Have to Start Somewhere

I watched as they shot and occasionally retrieved birds for them. I choked up when I picked up a dead dove for the first time, but mostly I enjoyed the afternoon. I completed what felt like a crash course in cleaning doves as we sat in the field and cleaned almost 30 birds. In fact, I felt like I had done most of the tough stuff but without the fun of shooting. One of the hunters I was with asked if this was something I wanted to try and I was surprised it still was.

Over the next few weeks I prepared for my first hunt. I borrowed a shotgun (technically it was a youth model, but you have to start somewhere). I went out to shoot clays with friends who knew what they were doing and were willing to teach me. The first time we went to the shooting range I was kind of freaked out. The first few shots weren't fun — they were jarring and loud. But I was determined, so I kept trying.

After realizing I was left-eye dominant, my friend said I should switch to left-handed shooting. This seemed insane — the shotgun didn't feel secure — I was sure it'd fly out of my hands when I shot it. But after some convincing, I tried left-handed

shooting and improved immensely. Suddenly I was breaking clays, and I had even adjusted to the feeling of firing a shotgun. I was actually enjoying myself. But these were clay targets — how was I going to feel when I actually shot an animal?

Time was running out on the season, and if I wanted to hunt doves this year, it needed to happen soon. I bought my license, migratory bird stamp and four boxes of shotgun shells. I knew I'd never feel completely ready, but I was ready enough to try, so we made plans to meet at the dairy on Sunday afternoon the week after Christmas.

## It All Comes Back to the Cows

Driving to Mesa, I started to get nervous. I was worried about how I'd feel after killing a dove, and I was worried I wouldn't even hit one. I didn't know which scenario worried me more. The drive went by way too quickly and before I knew it, I was pulling into the dairy's driveway.

When I climbed out of the car, I started to take a deep breath, but quickly thought better of it — if you've

ever smelled a dairy, you know why. The air was a little fresher as we made our way into the field, but I was feeling less and less confident I'd made the right decision.

I felt totally paralyzed now that the moment of truth was upon me. All I could think was there's no way I could do this. I decided to shoot a few rounds to settle in. I was sort of aiming at doves as they flew past, but I mostly needed to get the first shot off. I thought I'd feel better with that behind me, and I did. I went through about a dozen rounds where I was technically shooting at birds, but more just working out my nerves and getting used to firing a shotgun outside of the shooting range.

As the doves flew overhead, I wondered how far away a dove could be and still be within range of the shotgun, so I asked one of my friends. He gave me a good explanation and a bit of a pep talk. He also reminded me doves only fly past in large numbers for a limited time in the morning and the afternoon, so I should get to it.

As I walked back to my hay bale, I felt determined. I loaded my shotgun and stood ready with my finger on the safety. A dove or two flew past, I followed with my gun, but the shots were too late. And of course, as soon as I turned back around, a perfect group flew by, but my gun was empty. A few more groups went by, I took a few more shots and all the doves continued flying past unscathed. But I was beginning to feel more comfortable with my shotgun and the initial nervousness was subsiding enough to where I could concentrate on my form and the instruction I'd received.

## The Moment of Truth

A nice big group of doves took flight. I took the safety off of my gun and followed the birds' movement. They banked, turning right in front of me. I brought the gun into position, focused on one bird in the center of the group and fired. Suddenly, it was falling from the sky and I heard one of my friends cheer in the distance. I had done it — I hit the dove.

I was glad my shot had landed, but now what? I was worried the dove wouldn't be dead when I got to it. I walked quickly over to it, and thankfully it looked like it was dead before it hit the ground. It wasn't moving, and its eyes were already closed. The moment felt surreal.

I reached down and gently picked up the dove — it was still warm and its feathers were very soft. I felt terrible that this dove had been flying through the air moments before and now, because of me, it lay dead in my hands. I was fighting back tears as I returned to my hay bale.

As I carefully placed the dove next to my ammo, the initial guilt and sadness subsided and were replaced by the memory of why I wanted to go hunting in the first place. Every time I had eaten animal protein in my life someone had harvested it for me. This time, I had done it for myself.

I fired four boxes of ammo — 100 shells — and got four birds. Three birds were dead before they hit the ground. The fourth was only wounded and we had to chase it down before my friend dispatched it. That moment was rough; worse than the birds I harvested myself because I knew it was suffering until we were able to catch it. Experiencing the death of an animal and knowing I'm responsible for it is the biggest hurdle I will face going forward.

I haven't wasted an ounce of protein since that day. I have a new respect for the food I eat. I always knew it used

to be a living animal, but I don't think the concept really sunk in for me until I was the one to harvest it. 🦋

■ As an Arizona native, Amy Gleich has always had an appreciation for the state's amazing wildlife. Working as the Arizona Game and Fish Department's social media guru she has the pleasure of interacting with hunters, anglers and wildlife enthusiasts.

## Where to start

If you're interested in hunting but don't know how to get started, the Arizona Game and Fish Department has numerous opportunities for you to get information about ethical and responsible hunting.

The Outdoor Skills Network is a one-stop resource for hands-on events offered by the department and its partners that address the basics of hunting, fishing, trapping, safety, wildlife and other outdoor skills. For information about upcoming events, visit [www.azgfd.gov/OutdoorSkills](http://www.azgfd.gov/OutdoorSkills).

The department's hunter education courses cover key information including fair chase, hunters' ethics, firearms safety and handling, as well as laws and regulations. Anyone 9 and older may complete a hunter education course, and it's also a valuable experience for anyone who enjoys the outdoors and has an interest in conservation. Get more information at [www.azgfd.gov/HunterEd](http://www.azgfd.gov/HunterEd).