

BLACK JUDAS

By BERT POPOWSKI

I FIRST GLIMPSED HIM on a cross-country fishing trip. I had been hustling along to keep an overdue engagement, when my eyes fell on his home, a nondescript and homely wad of sticks jammed into the double crotch of an ancient willow tree. One head stuck truculently over the rim of that nest. That was Judas, as I later named him.

When I shinned up that tree, three beaks rose hungrily to the sky. The fourth young crow eyed me with cold disdain, knowing at that early age that I was neither mother, father, nor friend. He was bigger than the others, clad more warmly, and in every way evidenced the fact that he was the first of the brood to chip his way out of the restraining shell.

Those four young crows went home with me. For a fortnight they made noises of contentment midway between gurgling and strangling as I fed them milk-soaked gobs of bread. Then they started to mope, and, in the space of a week, two of them were dead, the usual healthy pink of their maws having turned an unhealthy gray.

A volume on the feeding of captive birds and animals was quickly found at the public library. Following its advice, a menu of ground liver was substituted. The birds swallowed this with indifference, but when I offered liver and kidney cut in small pieces their interest perked up. In worrying these bits of meat around in the dirt while getting the right grip on them, they naturally covered them with grains of sand. Whether this grit was just what their diet demanded, I don't know to this day, but their interest in life suddenly ballooned.

The two birds continued to consume their daily rations of kidney and liver until that unlucky day when one of them, intent on giving his wings a workout, hanged himself in the meshes of the chicken-wire pen in which they were housed.

The remaining bird, a fledgling no longer, was the one whose head I had glimpsed above the rim of his nest. Now he stalked about on arrogant legs, greedily gulped kidney and liver, and laid vicious black beak on any hand that tried to catch him. He was the swashbuckling representative of his clan; the king of his limited roost.

When I trimmed his flight feathers to prevent accidental escape, he squalled at the indignity. As I finished clipping one wing he plied beak and claws to free himself, but his expression of ludicrous dismay at flying in a four-foot circle in his bid for freedom, repaid me amply for the broken skin I suffered.

This was the time of the year when whole families of crows began to occupy consecutive fence posts, and it was only a matter of time before Joaquin Wilson and I hit upon the idea of using Judas for a decoy. When we first fastened his leathern legband to a stake, he squalled like a fiend and all but tore himself in two in his struggles. Then we hit on the idea of fastening a short length of tire-chain to the legband. This acted in the nature of a clog, and Judas' furious efforts to free himself from this encumbrance, plus the most raucous voice in all crowdom, attracted the attention of every crow in Brown County at one time or another.

Judas cursed me as I clipped his flight feathers; then stood off and coldly surveyed his surroundings

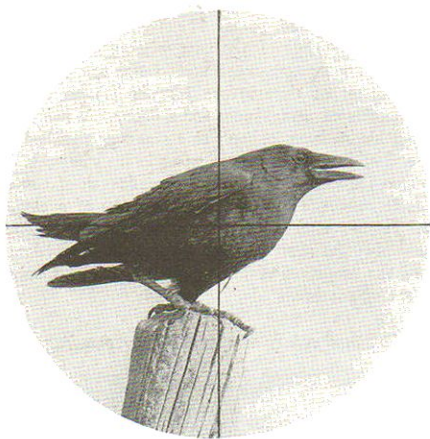


Many of those crows paid their lives for their curiosity, and it was only a matter of a week before Joaquin and I had to move our base of operations. The survivors seemed somewhat skeptical of Judas' continued difficulty with that clog, and refused to come within range. Coincident with this, Judas developed a streak of laziness, and refused to fight his clog with the same degree of violence and raucousness.

Our first move toward a remedy consisted of a stake driven into the ground. To the top of this was affixed a generous hunk of kidney—now considered a daily delicacy by our sable helpmate. Judas tackled this problem with considerable enthusiasm and such concentration that the meat lasted only a scant half-hour. Worse, he refused to utter a single squall while solving this problem, probably aware of the fact that other crows would also regard kidney as a delicacy.

Next we fastened a little cross-arm to the stake—a false perch which would fall away under his weight as he mounted it. It was fastened high enough above the ground so that it would swing past, and then its top end would protect the lump of meat on top of the stake. That was better, and a quarter of a kidney would occupy Judas for upward of an hour and a half. It peeved him to have that interfering stick in his way, and his outraged squawks brought many a black brother to his aid.

Whenever a strange crow would come near, Judas would ruffle his feathers and spend ten times as much time watching the invader—and cursing him in crow vernacular—as he spent on getting the morsel of food. The use of a crow call induced the same effect, for Judas would scan the



On the spot!

sky for the expected invading visitor, and then call him harsh names as he materialized in answer to the reed-invoked summons.

One day we caged the family cat within a few feet of the crow. The immediate hostility between the bird and the feline was a living, breathing thing. Judas' yelling approached a hysterical pitch, while Tabby laid back his ears and hissed and spat in answer. When one of Judas' wild brethren pitched out of the sky to lend aid and succor, the morsel of kidney was forgotten as both crows heaped invective on the cat's blameless head.

For nearly an hour the two crows kept up a steady uproar. By that time their clamor had attracted nearly a dozen others, who gathered to assist with this new danger to crowdom. When Joaquin laid low the second of these

newcomers with a carefully placed 100-grain bullet from his .250-3000 Winchester, the others billowed into the air, but returned immediately to continue their violent abuse of the cat.

They seemed to consider it a personal affront that one of their number had been slain by the invading cat—and at long range, too. Finally, one of the bolder ones mounted a post beside the roll of netting in which the cat was imprisoned. Joaquin shot that one, too, and the spat of the high-velocity bullet scared the cat. Its attempts to escape made the cage roll crazily about the meadow, and sent the crows into hysterics.

"Talk about your 'fool hens,'" murmured Joaquin, watching the shrieking maelstrom of black birds billow about the cat.

"We've got him on the run!" they shrieked triumphantly. "Come on, gang, let's finish off this trespasser!"

Finally they tired of their diving attacks, and, watching his chance, Joaquin let drive with another of his deadly 100-grain slugs. He got a double this time as two birds carelessly overlapped while pouring violent abuse on the hapless cat.

When we moved out toward the crows they broke in disorderly flight. So intent had they been on routing that cat, that gunfire had little or no effect on them; but the appearance of humans broke the spell.

From then on Judas and Tabby became standard equipment on our crow hunts. While they engaged in terrific bloodless warfare, Judas' wild relatives would wing to the rescue and produce an uproar that a band of paint-bedecked redskins would have envied.

There was a time when Tabby broke loose and streaked away in a welter of swooping crows. Judas added his frenzied cawing to the general bedlam, but whether it sprang from a wish to have his own nip of the flying cat's back, or a mourning of his departing hunting partner, we couldn't tell.

"There goes the best part of our decoy outfit," mourned Joaquin, as cat and crows disappeared in the brush at the edge of the river. When we got home and headed in at the back door with our kill of three ringnecks, there sat a wild-eyed and bur-decorated Tabby. It was at least six miles from town that we'd seen the last of that cat, and only a crow-inspired terror could have brought it home ahead of us.

Judas doing his stuff



Judas, too, slipped his shackle one day, and before we realized that he was free he was in the midst of his wild relatives. We gave him up for lost and mourned him sincerely, for he had given us the finest crow shooting that we'd been able to enjoy in years. But, even as we gathered up Tabby and Judas' leg-iron, the crow clamor broke out again. The flock came straight for us, and at its head was Judas—a desperate Judas who wanted only to come back to his human friends. That aluminum band on his foot had made him a conspicuous figure in the flock, which immediately turned upon him and drove him shrieking back to us. They would surely have killed him, as most wild creatures hunt out and persecute those of their species that do not conform to a set pattern of behavior or appearance.

He was a dejected figure, his plumage ruffled and disordered, as I approached him, and he offered no resistance to being caught and taken back to his comfortable roost. Once there he meticulously put every feather back in place, looking out at the empty sky at intervals, and cawing a hoarse warning as he did so. I imagine he was warning those crows that this was his home stamping ground and not to be lightly invaded.

Judas never forgot that indignity. His trust in his wild relatives was gone forever. Never again did he open wide his wings and croak a welcome as a sable brother dropped out of the sky. Instead he chose to regard each such visitor as a deadly interloper, and a savage note of warning characterized his cawing.

One day as I killed a visiting crow, the hollow-pointed 87-grain .257 bullet flung the carcass within reach of Judas, hampered as he was with his leg irons. With beak and claw he ripped at that carcass until he had doubled the terrific havoc made by the high-velocity bullet. He was, definitely, not in love with crowdom.

What Judas intended as a warning to other crows to keep their distance was more often than not misinterpreted as a warning against the cat, which was now an established part of our decoy set. When crows descended on the Judas-and-Tabby duo, Judas was the only calm one of the lot. The visiting crows would work themselves into a hysterical panic at the sight of him in the toils of some restraining contraption within a few feet of a hereditary enemy.

Judas poses with the cat



A few dead crows about the set never disturbed the visitors. Evidently they thought the cat responsible, and, on those rare occasions when they could make Tabby prowl about his limited quarters, their chief procedure consisted of faking dives at the cat, with the intention of frightening him into headlong flight. That failing, they soon tired of their power dives, alighted on nearby fenceposts, and contributed inviting targets for our marksmanship.

Shotguns, we found, were not as effective as rifles in this respect. In the first place, we would have to get within fifty yards of our two decoys in order to be consistently effective, and at that close range we attracted so much attention that usually after a half-dozen shots it was all off for the rest of the day.

When using rifles we parked our car from 150 to 200 yards away from the decoys, and, whenever possible, toward the sun from them. Then we would place a blanket over the windows on the sunny side of the car, effectively screening out the light and making ourselves almost invisible in the dark cave so created. The only remaining indication of danger lay in two protruding rifle barrels. Frequently only one of these was showing, as one of us watched proceedings through a pair of binoculars.

Complete immobility was the order of the day immediately following a shot. Then, when the two decoys again recaptured the unanimous attention of the visiting crows, we'd get into position for the next shot.



—And Joaquin gathers in another

Gone are the days when we used to drive madly about the countryside, skidding to a stop at every Jim Crow that decorated a fence-post, only to have it go kiting off to safety. Now we let those same Jim Crows come to us and put on a show for our entertainment. Sometimes the show is so good that we spend long minutes forgetting to center the crosshairs on our sable targets. But when we do, the 6x Fecker on Joaquin's Winchester 54 or the 4x Fecker on my custom-barrelled Remington 30S bring our targets up sharp and clear. Then there is a careful squeeze, followed by a whiplike crack, and—if we're fortunate—a similar crack at the point of aim, as high-velocity ammunition makes a shambles of another black egg-thief or nestling-murderer. Judas shrieks in unholy glee, and Joaquin and I grin at each other in self-congratulation.