

# BLACK-OUT for CROWS

By **BERT POPOWSKI**

Photos by the Author

**C**ROW HUNTING!" exclaimed my wife despairingly. "You've worked 50 consecutive weeks and on the first day of your vacation you want to go crow hunting. You'll chase a few scattered crows, wear yourself out building blinds in what you fondly hope are their roosts, and come home after dark—your pants torn half off and barb-wire scratches all over you. If you can't rest during your vacation, why don't you do something that's fun?"

"This'll be fun," I defended.

"You've been out after them every week-end during the year—except when you were out after squirrels, or ducks, or pheasants," she returned to the attack. "You haven't been home a single Saturday."

"Yes, I was," I reminded her. "When John was sick."

"And the next day you took him along," she accused. She shrugged her shoulders in defeat and went to pack a lunch. You can't expect her to appreciate crows. She doesn't understand the thrill that comes of outwitting a bird that has proved himself more than equal to taking care of himself in a world that threatened his life from egg to adult—and beyond, and from dawn to dark.

**L**ET OTHERS gather about the thin shanks of a rheumy-eyed oldster as he quavers his tale of the days of the old market hunters. Come, we will get us a shoot such as they never dreamed of. You smile? Mark this well: it will be my turn to smile when we come wheeling home tonight, long after dark, your

shoulder stiff and aching from the steady recoil of your pet scattergun, my throat raw from endless calling.

Shells? A half-case per gun is none too many. Be sure your gun is cleaned, oiled and in perfect order. You'll have no time to tinker with it when the zero hour opens. Nor will you find your friends willing to lend you their guns, or let you shoot up their rapidly dwindling stock of shells.

Ordinarily, two days are required for a real crow shoot. However, we will start at noon for a crow roost I spotted as long ago as last fall, while I was pheasant hunting. Will they be there again this spring? Certainly; for unless a major upheaval drives them from it, they will continue to use it as long as there are crows in the country.

While we drive I'll tell you how to locate a crow roost, which usually takes a full half-day of scouting and continuous observation. Ordinarily crows will swing out of their roosting groves in the morning, forage in an area that may extend 20 miles in every direction from their roost, and start to return about four o'clock in the afternoon. At that time it is no unusual thing to see a scattering of crows, all flying in the same general direction.

As evening comes on they converge on the roost from all directions, though the last half-mile or so is usually upwind. If you find crows flying in an opposite direction from that in which you have been trailing them, you may have overshot their roost. Then you must cast back and forth until you find the line they are traveling and follow it more slowly.

In cold weather crows gather near their roost earlier than if the weather is warm and fair. They do not see well at night and, though they might be more comfortable on the ground, in some sheltered draw, they must perch in trees or shrubs to guard against predators.

As winter comes on, and the trees lose their leaves, they may prefer to roost in evergreen groves, though they will have been roosting in such groves for some time before cold weather sets in. The evergreen foliage breaks the wind and partially conceals them from enemies, no small concern if their roosts are near the timbered areas where great horned owls hang out.

Such evergreen roosts are the crow hunter's delight. The trees screen you from the crows above, so it is only a matter of building a screen in front of where you propose to shoot.

**B**Y TWO O'CLOCK we have covered the 80-odd miles to the grove and pull up in its shelter. The wind is sharp. Just to check on its crow possibilities, we walk into it. Sure enough, the ground is littered with thousands of the pinkish pellets crows disgorge. They are the general size and shape of a pecan nut and lose their pinkish color with age. There is, too, a whitewash of droppings over the carpet of leaves and old branches.

Now to build the roost. We test the wind. It is blowing from the south, so we locate a natural opening and back into it until our rear is covered from prying eyes. Before us we erect a blind of branches and weeds, woven closely and breast high. Thus we can crouch behind it until our targets are within range, then straighten for the shooting. If they pass by overhead we may even drop to our knees and stay further out of sight of the incomers, shooting only those directly above us.

In an hour the blind is done. We place our shells in position, give it a last survey, and drive the car to a distance, so no lingering suspicion will swerve the black birds away. Guns are loaded and placed within reach, and we sit down to munch sandwiches and drink scalding coffee. The afternoon chill makes it welcome; besides, we'll have no time to lunch when the flight starts coming in. We'll be too busy.

Hist, there's the first one! See that black speck,



rising and falling as it bucks the rising wind? That's a scout, sent ahead to report whether last night's roost is safe housing again. Why do crows do that? Because they've learned that safety is a precious and elusive quality, here today and gone tomorrow.

That scout must not be missed, for if he warns the flock your shoot will be abbreviated considerably. Miss the scouts and only a few birds will come in—and they'll be wary. But this one comes on, straight for the blind. Two hundred yards away he pauses for a rest on a dead stub. This is the moment. The crow call comes out and at its strident yell for help that black bandit springs off his perch, squawking encouragement to his distressed relative. *Caw! Caw! Caw!* On he comes. A quick swing—bang—he comes tumbling down, a shower of black feathers drifting after him.

Here comes another, so keep down. He saw the first go into the grove, so hold still. That old rallying cry speeds him up and he comes down the same alley. Another shot and he thumps solidly beside the blind. Two down, and both of them scouts. That's good work.

Tie a slip noose at each end of this two-foot piece of string and slip each loop over a black head. Now fling the pair of them up in a tree, twenty feet to the right and as many yards behind the blind. The next two scouts we treat similarly, throwing them up to swing in the branches to our left and rear. These are our decoys. They'll keep sharp eyes from centering their attention on us while they're coming in. Now let 'em come!

**L**OOK! See those black specks tumbling playfully about in the sky? There they come, the vanguard of hundreds of crows, flowing along in the sky like a thin, black river. They suspect nothing, for their scouts have found death instead of information.

Here goes the old battle cry—loud and harsh and carrying far on the rising wind. See them stop their clowning? See those black wings settled down into steady purposeful beat? They've heard it; get ready. In two minutes they'll be tumbling about our blind, squawking wildly. I call continually, now.

Guns boom beside me, spout a steady leaden hail at the black horde above. Birds stop their frantic flapping with a terrible finality, to come thumping about us. Or, wings buckle and the birds whirl dizzily down, squawking in rage. One tumbles directly into the blind, narrowly missing me as I intone my repeated pleas for help.

Birds above the blind glimpse movement as we feed shells into smoking guns, and dive away. Others come racing in to replace them, curiosity in their racing wings, rage bubbling out of their black throats. One of their number is in dire distress, for isn't it shrilling an appeal for help? So ingrained is their clan loyalty that the birds whirl and pitch and sail away, but come squawking back from another direction.

My cheeks wrinkle in helpless mirth as you scabble around for shells. Two boxes have spurted through your gun and the crows are thicker than ever. Time means nothing. Only those bobbing, weaving, dipping black targets that draw your muzzle like a magnet.

The thin sprinkling of fallen crows is rapidly thickening. There is one that lodged in the branches of that tree. Another dives down beside it, trying to help it and you shoot it down. Another, a cripple, comes down in the same tree top, catches a branch with clutching claws and hangs on desperately.

Your gun is hot and the powder smell is rank in the air. After a lull the gun spouts fire like a Roman candle. It is getting dark. I redouble my appeals for help, for our shooting time is growing short. Soon we'll be unable to see them unless they're directly overhead.

Ten, twenty more shots. It's over. You've had enough? You like it? Sure you do. So does every one who tries it. And though it may be months or years before you get into another shoot like it, you'll never forget the first one you ever had.

You rub your shoulder gingerly. I clear a rasping throat. Now you will want to learn to call—and do it well. Most of the crow calls on the market will do the trick, though some of them will take more

pampering than others. Beware of those that are made of two different kinds of materials: when weather conditions change, so will the tone of the call.

Hold the call in the crotch of the thumb and forefinger of your left hand, with the reed toward you. Curl the tip of the forefinger into the bell to partially muffle the stridency of the reed. Use your right hand to break up the calling, to camouflage its whereabouts.

To sound the reed you must grunt repeatedly through it. It is a repetitious "*Ugh! Ugh! Ugh!*" the impetus of which comes from the belly muscles, not from the chest. Once you get the hang of it you'll find it far less tiring than blowing it—and much more effective.

Try to make it sound as if something had a crow by the nape of the neck and was roughing it up, giving it just enough hope of escape to enable it to yell loudly and profanely for help. The individual calls are of two distinct kinds. You may start on a high note and let it fall, or start low and ride the note to a higher pitch; but don't try to use a monotone call. It will attract only those crows that are still in their diapers.

Practice, practice, practice. Every time you slip out of sight of city streets take your call along. Try it on every crow you sight. If you can make them answer you, you're progressing. When you can get them to leave their perch and come winging toward you, it's time you were taking a shotgun along.

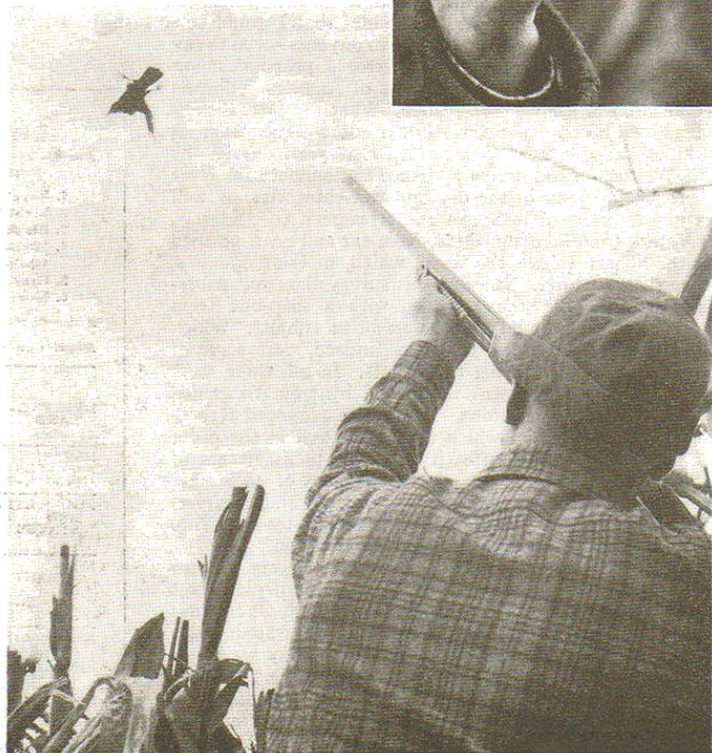
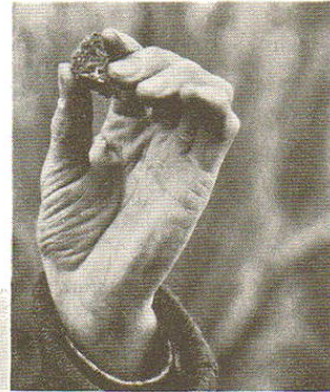
Using both hands makes it rather awkward to keep a gun in instant readiness, but I've a way that may help you. Cradle it in your left arm, the butt against your belt or your thigh.

Continue calling until the bird is in position for the shot. If you stop they'll almost invariably wheel back at once, instead of flying the ten feet that would bring them into the opening where you hope to shoot.

Make sure of the first one, then swing right back to your calling. If one bird falls the rest of the flock will often turn back to help the stricken one, ignoring gunfire al-

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*Under a crow roost the ground will be covered with disgorged pellets shaped like this one*



*Wings buckle and crows whirl dizzily down, squawking with rage. Others come in to replace them.*

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So that's some advice that went wrong. That man will probably make a new tent soon, of better materials, and it will be a good one. He most evidently has skill with his hands, he planned with care, and he has now had the benefit of field tests. And he's had a grand lot of satisfaction in sleeping in a tent that stands the gaff, and that he made himself.

The man who seeks to make equipment to save money won't get far. He'll spend as much as if he purchased articles in a sporting goods store, or won't get anything at all. He'll not have an efficient camping outfit. But a man who likes to use his hands, who has some skill, who will plan well before he cuts into a piece of cloth or leather, may turn out a satisfactory product. He may even save money.

(End of camping department)

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most entirely. Eventually you may graduate to that select class where you can call them back again and again. Then you'll learn that there are some crows that the best callers in the world can't fool. Long before they swing into range they'll be able to detect a false note in your calling, and swing away to safety.

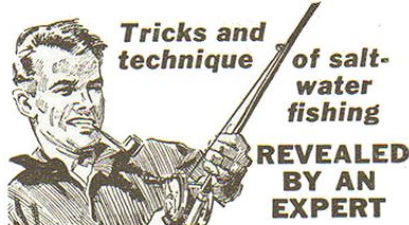
I say a good roost shoot is a two-day job. The first day is spent in trailing the crows and learning where they stop for the night.



When one bird is downed, continue calling; others will rush to its aid

The next day the blind is built and the actual shooting takes place. If the birds see you take your position in a blind only a few of them will come in to your call, no matter how expert you are.

Once a grove has been shot out the birds will be wary of it, going to roost only after dark. Even then, one shot will send them away, perhaps to roost elsewhere for a night or two. I have seen as many as 500 birds in the lee of a grove, where no one would suspect their presence. They keep quiet about their roost, no matter how strident-voiced they may be during the daylight hours. The only way to find them is to follow their flight lanes, then double-check the grove for the tell-tale pellets and whitewash of droppings.



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