

BUBO RETIREES

A crow shooter takes advantage of the hereditary enmity between owls and crows—with interesting results

By BERT POPOWSKI



BUBO was a killer, no doubt about it. Within his little world he struck fear into more hearts than any of his furred or feathered neighbors. Whenever I found the little tufts of fur and other earthly remains of a Molly Cottontail I could nearly always find evidence to show that Bubo was responsible. As for the smaller animals and the birds, a few drops of blood or a thin scattered shower of bright feathers was usually all that remained.

Strictly speaking, Bubo was a by-product. My older boy cajoled me into trying to trap a fox that lived within a handful of miles of town. I caught Bubo instead. He snapped a powerful black beak and hissed spitefully as I approached. Protected by a thick pair of horsehide mittens, I released his imprisoned foot and, protected as it was by a thick mat of heavy feathers, I found it uninjured.

His beautiful yellow eyes intrigued me and I took him home—to the boy's unbounded delight. He was a perfect photographic subject. Sometimes, tired of having his feathers smoothed and being prodded around from pose to pose, he would fly halfway across the basement and find himself a perch other than the gnarled bit of ancient willow we had nailed up for him.

There he was accustomed to find the long slivers of red meat cut from the flanks of the jackrabbits we shot. Occasionally we trapped a mouse and served it up for dessert.

As the first slushy days of March made their appearance Bubo became restless. Evening after evening I would head a low, muttering "Who! Who! Who!" coming from the cage where we had transferred him. Armed with a flashlight I made several stealthy trips there, thinking to surprise whatever it was that was bothering him.

It wasn't until the evening that I became deeply engrossed in a Christmas copy of John James Audubon's "Birds of America" that I stumbled on the answer. No wonder I found no prowler about Bubo's cage; his peace of mind was disturbed by the naked little rascal with the bow and quiver of arrows. Bubo was in love!

His living quarters now consisted of an abandoned chicken house. A small wire pen led out from a window long since bereft of even the fragments of glass, and the single branch of an apple tree that intruded into the pen was his favored perch. There he sat in complete immobility, hour after

hour. Only the hysterical screeching of an occasional robin told its own story of the bird having unexpectedly encountered Bubo's unwinking orbs. Only at night would he sit out under the sky, straining eyes and ears to sift every message they brought to him. Like a cat, he hated to get wet, and on rainy nights he could be found under the shelter of the roof where chickens had once perched.

As migrating crows began to put in an appearance, Joaquin Wilson and I spent more and more of our leisure time in sharpening our scope settings on these sable targets. One day I recalled that Audubon had placed crow on Bubo's bill of fare, so I brought in one that hadn't been too badly mutilated. The next morning only a scattered litter of black feathers remained.

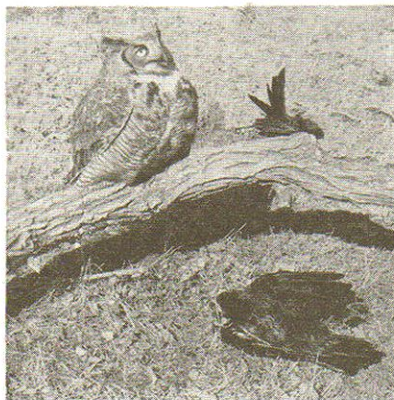
"Let's stake him out for a crow decoy," urged Joaquin just as we were leaving for a week-end of shooting. Bubo's box-office attraction was instantaneous—and colossal. If his human allies had shown just a shade more judgment—and shot more accurately—he would have accounted for every crow that glimpsed him that morning.

As it was, his baleful yellow eyes mesmerized those crows until they shrieked themselves into a fanatical hysteria that ended only when we ran out of ammunition. Even then we sat in the car and marveled at the public he attracted; a public that screamed maledictions at his tufted ears but disturbed his serenity no whit.

It was a one-sided demonstration of the deadly animosity that exists between two of Mother Nature's feathered children. The other side—since it was demonstrated during the black hours—we never saw, but judicious reading and considerable observation gave us a good idea as to how it operated.

During the day, the black legions are never so happy as when they can harass one of the barred killers out of the county. At night the owl drifts about like a soundless Angel of Death, striking down many a daylight tormentor. As a result, crows never build their nests in a grove that harbors an owl, for they are more than likely to leave their orphan nestful of eggs exposed to the pitiless blaze of the noon-day sun—if they live long enough to produce a clutch of eggs. Their safety, then, depends on driving every owl they find so far away that it cannot find its way back to their roosts

With two crows already to his credit, Bubo watches another come within range



or nesting groves.

No matter how completely they outnumbered him, Bubo's black tormentors never quite dared come to grips with him. One day we had a vivid demonstration of why this was so. After several successful shots and clean kills, Joaquin got careless and pulled a poor one. The 100-grain .250-3000 bullet winged a crow, bringing it down within a foot of the immobile owl.

Without seeming to displace a feather, Bubo reached out four terrible, black, inch-long talons and gathered in that cripple. I had been watching proceedings through the binoculars and that crow hardly quivered from the moment Bubo touched it. A brief examination showed that the talons had struck the crow through mid-body, just behind the thick pad of breast muscles, and had pierced the vitals like so many bullets. No wonder death was so instantaneous that only the brief lifting of the remaining wing, and its slow descent, marked the passing of the crow.

"I'd hate to have him nail me like that," observed Joaquin, as we tore the crow from Bubo's reluctant grasp. "No wonder they heap choice invective on him instead of meeting him beak to claw!"

Weeks later I was to recall that grim warning. When Bubo was to be carried I usually grasped his ankles with a heavily mittened hand and pushed him off his perch. This automatically closed his talons, and I then slipped my hand further down to hold his fists within my palm. There they weren't able to become an edged menace.

His wide, sweeping wings were then folded and he rode upright under my arm, apparently as docile and harmless as a kitten. Only when he lost his equilibrium was he apt to grab at anything within reach of his murderous talons. En route to where we planned to set up our blind he was laid on his back between my knees, his fisted talons secure in a mittened hand, though he rarely moved until he was lifted.

When we first tried to tether him we used a length of light chain. One end of it was fastened to a light anklet, and the other to a stake in the ground. This was a mistake. Equipped with tremendous lifting power, his wings almost tore him in two when he elected to fly away from the persistently nagging grasp of that chain at his ankle.

We next tried fastening a short length of tire chain to his leathern anklet. This was better for, when he was goaded beyond endurance by swooping crows, he could fly a short distance without being severely wrenched by coming to the end of an immovable tether. However the constant weight of the chain worried the bird so much that we feared for his welfare. He would fight the clog in such frenzy that his exertions, plus the heavy overcoat of handsome barred feathers he wore, all but smothered him—especially during warm days.

"What we need is a perch that he can carry with him when he flies—for a short distance," suggested Joaquin.

"If we could sew a permanent ankle band on his leg perhaps he'd get used to it and not fight it," I contributed. A harness maker agreed to tackle the job—if we held Bubo during the procedure. Three copper wires were sewed on the outside of the leather to prevent his beak from worrying through the anklet, and a tiny brass ring was sewed in to serve as a means for fastening him to his combination perch and clog.

By withdrawing his favorite apple branch perch and substituting a half-dozen others we soon found that he favored a piece of ash slab, on which grew a short branch which just fitted the grasp of his trap-like talons. A short length of fine chain secured him to this movable perch and we sallied out to learn how this combination worked.

Since an owl usually selects some eminence from which he can view his surroundings, we first set Bubo's perch on a fencepost. Before we had time to place our car to the best advantage, a cruising crow spied him. Its discovering yell brought a dozen

The author with a couple of crows decoyed within shooting range by Bubo the owl

Photos
by the
Author

Bubo looks puzzled as one of his tormentors almost drops on his head



of its black kin hustling to the fray. For two solid hours Bubo gave back glare for glare while we methodically thinned the black ranks. Those crows evidently considered him personally responsible for the scattering of carcasses that grew about his perch. Their yelling rose to a hysterical crescendo after each such carcass whirled raglike to the ground.

"Here's the last one," I regretted, snicking the bolt down on the final cartridge in my ammunition bag. More than a dozen crows were still milling about the motionless owl but

it was but a brief wait until one of them perched on an adjoining fencepost while continuing to strain its raucous vocal cords. A careful squeeze and the bird tumbled to the ground without so much as a squawk.

While Joaquin cased the two rifles I walked out to retrieve our decoy and to take a snapshot of the crow havoc strewn about his perch. Then it happened. I grabbed Bubo's ankles in the customary manner and reached down to unsnap his perch, when one of his talons pricked a careless fingertip. I yelped involuntarily and loosened my hold on his fists. In a flash he pulled one foot loose and grabbed my wrist to steady himself. Flight was farthest from his mind; all he wanted was to regain his balance—but two of those black talons pierced my wrist until they grated on bone.

I thrust the perch before him and loosened my grasp of his other ankle, whereupon he casually loosed my wrist and set his claws in the ash slab.

I had never fully realized the tremendous strength and killing power embodied in the talons of rapacious birds. It was an excellent object lesson, although a painful one. I didn't doubt then, nor do I now, that such a stroke delivered in anger, and landing on a man's neck, might very easily kill. It explained fully the comparative absence of any signs of a struggle wherever I had found cottontails that had fallen victim to the great owls. Those bunnies probably died quickly and painlessly.

Joaquin was greatly concerned when I told him of it, a telling that was an explanation of the wobbly manner in which I carried Bubo back to the car. My arm felt numb to my shoulder but it was the shock that made me rubber-legged. He hustled me back to town and to a doctor's office—for an anti-tetanus injection.

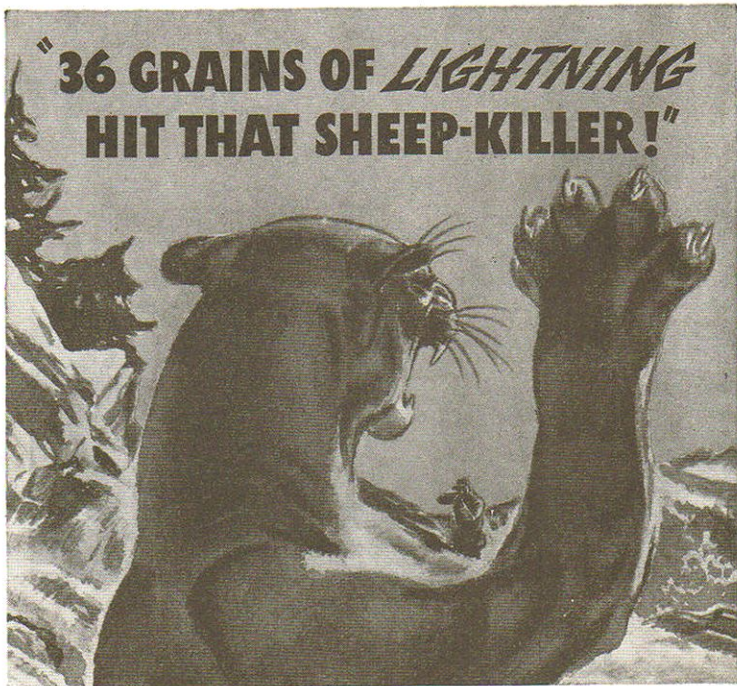
"It's the smart thing to do," the doctor said, swabbing busily, "most wild animals and birds carry infection of one kind or another; an infection against which they (Continued on page 45)

Marlin sent through one of the standard jobs with barrels bored full choke and modified. Being a curious chap, I decided to see what this would do at skeet. For the last month we have been shooting it weekly and getting as much "kick" out of this little combination as we have out of some of the familiar 12 gauge numbers.

We have found that regardless of the choke, if one does his part the birds break. Last week we shot the highest score of the winter months—which is nothing particular to brag about since in the zero weather of the past eight or ten shooting Saturdays we found that by the time we reached Station 2 the hands are filled with thumbs instead of fingers.

Anyway, we have done some pretty good work with it and credit this to the balance, the smooth trigger pulls, and the excellent boring of the gun. Even in full choke work with a little bit of practice, the difficult Station 8 shots are readily taken. This same gun has been shot by some top notch shooters at the writer's local club with equal results.

If old John Marlin could rise from his grave and view the recent developments of the present Marlin organization he would probably smile and lay back for a comfortable nap. His memory is not being insulted.



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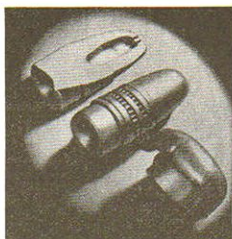
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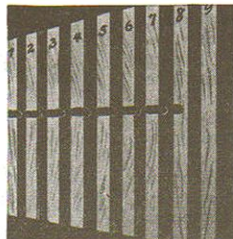
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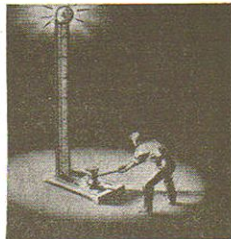
Remington



Kleanbore* Hi-Speed .22 hollow point expands to .347 caliber. The hollow point bullet on Remington .22 rimfire ammunition is designed to give the maximum effective expansion. The picture above shows a cross-section of one of these bullets, and the whole bullet before and after impact.



Kleanbore* Hi-Speed .22 solid point penetrates eight 3/8" planks. Eight pine boards, each 3/8 inch thick, can be penetrated by a Kleanbore Hi-Speed .22 long rifle solid point bullet. These .22 speed kings are built like big game cartridges, with solid brass cases—strong, to hold the extra power.



157 foot-lbs. of energy loaded into a Kleanbore Hi-Speed .22. Here's proof of the wallop in this ammunition! A 36-grain hollow point Hi-Speed bullet leaves your rifle muzzle at 1400 feet per second—faster than the speed of sound!—with a muzzle energy of fully 157 foot-pounds!



"Wal, it's taken me twenty years to do it, but I've finally bred a perfect retriever."

BUBO RETIRES

(Continued from page 11)

may have built up a certain degree of immunity. The risk is intensified when the wound is diametrically narrow and deep, as the blood has little chance to flow freely and thus rinse out the wound. Cats, squirrels, all pets in fact, can very easily give one lockjaw unless immediate precautions are taken."

Thereafter Bubo rode to and from our hunting grounds in a long, narrow cage; a contrivance which we slipped over him as he sat on his perch and which never allowed him dangerous freedom of his talons. We tried never to startle him and as a result he frequently turned his eyes away from us while in his living quarters—a most un-owl-like procedure.

Bubo virginianus is a gentleman of substance now. No longer does he have to fly a nightly beat, in search of whom he may devour. His food consists of gophers and rabbits which fall to the boy's .22 but in spite of his curtailed menu he works only during the crow migrating seasons. Joaquin has suggested the preparation of a "S. R. O." (Shells Run Out) sign to save wear and tear on crow tonsils. Bubo doesn't care one way or another. He packs them in at every personal appearance.