



Until deep dusk blacks them out against the dark dome of the sky, they'll keep coming in to the caller who is expert.

The TECHNIQUE of CROW CALLING

By BERT POPOWSKI

Success in the art of crow calling is opening a new era of sport to America's shotgun addicts

slip. With characteristic editorial brevity came the answer:

"Some years ago Oscar Quam wrote us a series of articles on duck calling, which proved to be quite successful. The mechanics of correct calling seem to be the gist of most questions asked us about crow hunting."

Sure enough, that was the answer. Whether written with pen, pencil or typewriter—on bond, ruled or wrapping paper—the letters all asked one major question: "How can I successfully call crows?" Oh, there were minor questions—about the proper loads to use in a favorite scattergun, where one might encounter roosts, items of personal experience in the general warfare against crows, and the like. But in the main the letters showed a genuine desire to learn how to call crows so these sportsmen might

contribute their bit to pest eradication.

So, I ran a fresh ribbon into my battered typewriter, snapped off the war news, and set out to teach America's sportsmen how to call crows. Thus far everything went beautifully but I soon learned that teaching crow calling without having the student before you was nearly as difficult as teaching swimming to an illiterate by correspondence.

AFTER a dozen abortive attempts I appealed to Tony Hoover. He enjoys calling and shooting crows so much that it is always a chore for him to attend to business long enough to eke out a comfortable income. Tony grinned at me, then scratched a grizzled head.

"Tell you what we'll do," he suggested. "We'll go crow hunting."

Why, sure; why hadn't I thought of that? We busted out of town a half-hour later, the car laden with a case of shells winking in bright newness. Tony's auto and my Ithaca pump chummed up in the back seat as we drove.

"There are any number of good crow calls on the market," tutored Tony. "Among them are the Turpin

MONTHS AGO, when "Black Pestilence," appearing in *SPORTS AFIELD*, ran out of my typewriter, I was actuated by a selfish yen—the recording of personally enjoyable experiences in crow hunting—rather than a desire to instruct others in the methods of successfully conducting the sport. However, when the yarn appeared in *SPORTS AFIELD*, I was the puzzled recipient of a shower of letters from a dozen states. Fan mail, by gum.

I wrote Editor Whipple about it, hinting delicately that such popularity must be deserved, to wit: first, the yarn must have been a ring-tailed hum-dinger; second, couldn't something be done about getting more and bigger numbers on the green payoff



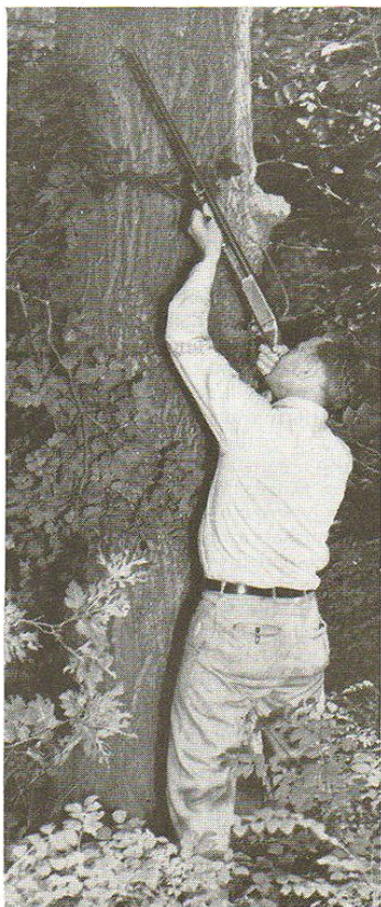
The writer examines some of the 124 crows which bit the dust in a two-hour, two-man, two-gun shoot.

call made by Tom Turpin of Birmingham, Alabama; the Hoosier call made by George Garrison of Delphi, Indiana; the Olt call made by P. S. Olt of Pekin, Illinois; the Ditto call made by Charles Ditto of Keithsburg, Illinois; the Monroe call made by N. K. Monroe of Oshkosh, Wisconsin; the Jahn call made by J. R. Jahn of Spirit Lake, Iowa; and a number of others.

"My personal favorite is the Jahn call, because I am able to obtain a much clearer tone with it than any other. It isn't the easiest call to master, but once you have used it successfully you'll have no trouble in successfully operating other makes of calls. My opinion doesn't detract a particle from the effectiveness of other calls; it just so happens that my vocal chords are able to use the Jahn call better than any other.

"Unfortunately it is next to impossible to teach anyone how to properly sound a crow call except by personal instruction, though such tutoring is readily applied by anyone who has eyes, and uses them, and whose ears are sharp enough to catch and retain the tonal inflections of the various important calls.

"I've tried to assist fellow sports-



Every bit of woodland houses at least one family of crows, ready to come to your call.



"There are some drifting into the timber to the roost beyond," the writer observes to spectator.

men by means of written instructions as well as by having phonograph records made, yet neither of these methods—used singly or in conjunction—were of appreciable help."

Well, there we were. Tony couldn't tell me how to call crows—he could only show me. But the prospect of going crow hunting with the master caller of them all was enough to brighten any day. Since then I've found more than a grain of truth in his contention that you must have both eyes and ears and employ them both if you're to acquire the art in a few sittings. After that's over, practice will enable you to woo any crow that flies.

BECAUSE I'm a Hoover disciple I use a Jahn call. We'll continue with that and I'll point out features you should look for in a satisfactory call. Foremost of all requirements is that it be both light and small. If you're a right-handed shot it should be carried in the crotch of your left hand during all the hours you stay afield. Tony even carries his, properly crotched, when he drives.

The reason for it is three-fold. In the first place it makes the call so much a part of your hand that no thought need be devoted to it. Second, it makes your hand flexible enough to perform its multiple chores in spite of the hindrance of the call. The final reason has to do with crow habit and behavior when coming in to the call.

"When you're calling them in and then stop, they turn away immediately," Tony told me. "If you take a shot, that only speeds their going.

To call them back after the shot you have to be instantly on the job. That means the call must be immediately available. Hung on a cord about your neck it often evades the grasp of clutching fingers. If it's already in your hand it's a simple matter to pop it into your mouth just a split second after the recoil has jarred your shoulder."

Next, your call should have a large bell or muzzle so you can, while the call is properly held in the crotch formed by the forefinger and the thumb of the left hand, partially plug the muzzle with the end of the forefinger. This assists in muffling the natural stridency of any reed and to deepen it to more accurately simulate the vocal equipment of the crow.

Don't poke the call halfway down your throat and wrap your lips about it in the manner of a pickaninny mouthing a lollypop. Place it against your teeth, which should be slightly parted, and gently close your lips about the mouthpiece. Your left hand holds the call in place so your lips are only for the purpose of controlling the tone of the call by allowing more or less air leakage about the mouthpiece.

THAT completes your schooling in the fundamentals and leads you right up to the crucial factor in your calling. If you master it you can be a white-haired boy among crow callers; if not, you're a fizzle. Here it is: Don't blow the call; don't trill it. Sound it by effecting a vibration of the reed by uttering a sort of "ugh-ugh-ugh" grunting in a falling cadence such as a crow would nat-



Tony Hoover (left) invokes his magic while the writer awaits the crows. Tony has enjoyed crow hunts for years—never tires of them.

urally make while in distress and calling for aid. Simple, isn't it?

Yet on your faithfully following this last item of instruction hinges your future as a crow scourge. Some of my pupils have mastered it in a lesson or two; others have spent scores of days in vain attempts to lure any consistent number of crows within range of their scatterguns.

"Years ago, when we used to plant corn in rows, it was a common thing to see a crow dig along a row until his belly was full, then fly to the top of the nearest dead stub to digest it. Then we began to cross plant corn so we could keep the weeds under better control and the crows soon caught on and dug only where the crossed lines intersected. The final step was

As an example of my bright pupils take Ray DeRosia. He'd located a crow roost and was all set to take me out there at the first opportunity. We stopped at a friend's place to look at his fine kennel of English setters. The conversation naturally drifted over to crows, for the birds from this roost were the scourge of the countryside for miles around. Everyone in the neighborhood was in favor of exterminating them, yet the roost prospered.

"Why, those crows are so smart it's amazing," averred Clyde Elrich, who owned the setter kennels.

the mechanical planter which plants a hill every so often but leaves no trace of the precise spot at which it plants.

"That puzzled some of the smart crows, but not for long. They'd dig along a row until they found a hill, eat it, and then dig to the next hill. After eating that, they'd look back at the distance they'd come from the last hill, pace off an equal distance and dig up hill after hill with unbelievable precision."

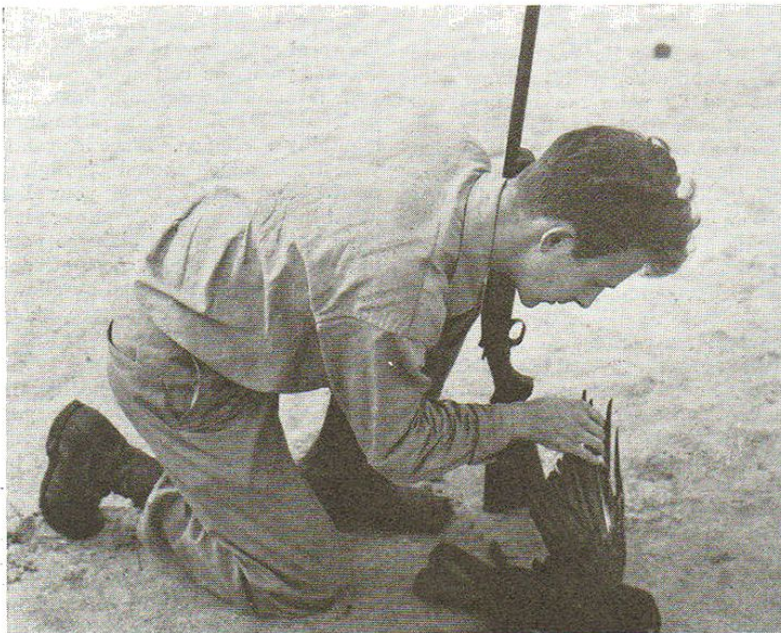
THAT rather set me back on my heels. Perhaps this was a breed of superlatively intelligent crows and no mere run-of-the-mill black squawkers. It was with some apprehension that we built a blind along their flyway and settled down to await them. But they obeyed the reed-involved summons for assistance as eagerly as any other crows I'd ever called and Ray and I left 42 of their black carcasses as grim warning to the survivors.

Ray was jubilant when I presented him with an extra call that I carry as regularly as I do my kodak, when I go crow hunting. Less than two days later I had a call from him. With only one day of tutoring he had gone out on a solo hunt, summoned and slain 27 more crows. So, as I say, it all depends on how apt a pupil you are and how accurately you can follow instructions and keep following them.

Of course all of us have our off days. Take the mid-winter hunt Ed Forseth and I took last January. Those crows shuttled about from grove to grove like women in a bargain basement. They kept us off balance all of the afternoon and we bagged precisely four birds, and shot at only one that didn't drop. I called crows until my tongue hung out and I had to roll it up and put it back. No dice.

I swore the blackest of crow hunters' oaths and on an April Sunday we ventured forth in another attempt to seduce a satisfactory number of them within range. We pulled up at a thin scraggly growth of willow—less than two gunshots away from the one where we'd compiled our day's bag of four some weeks earlier.

Ed led the way back to the self-same blind that had produced a splendid zero during that fateful day and we mended it with the addition of a tumbleweed here and there. For a half-hour we sat in expectant silence, vainly listening for a single crow to sound off. Twenty yards away grew a pussy-willow tree and I moved over to hack off some of the branches to take home. A shower of black shadows fell about me and the vocifer-



Left—a dead crow is a "good" crow; alive, it's a disease bearer, a game bird scourge.

ous din of incoming crows all but deafened me.

With the steady wind at our back and a misty rain falling, we enjoyed one of the finest two-man shoots I've ever shared. Just when the birds were coming in best Ed scrambled eagerly in his shell bag and came up empty-handed.

"Take mine," I urged, lifting the call back to tired lips and a raw throat. "How many shells did you bring?"

"Four boxes," he grinned. "One box for every crow we got last time."

"I only brought three and they're half gone. I thought you'd be doing most of the shooting anyway."

IN ANOTHER thirty minutes it was all over and we walked out of the blind to dispatch a few cripples, our empty guns as harmless as so much gas pipe. Over 175 rounds of ammunition had spouted a leaden hail for only a bit over two hours and we actually picked up 124 birds and spread them about for picture purposes. None of them was more than 75 yards from the blind. While we carried double handfuls of riddled carcasses to a grassy spot and spread them out the major portion of the flock milled about us and shrieked vile maledictions at us.

"Talk about extremes," marvelled Ed. "Smart as any animal living the last time we were out here, and look at 'em today. Willing to commit wholesale suicide."

"Can't you give me some credit for the improvement in my calling?"

"Not much," grudgingly. "It seemed to me they just didn't give a damn today. Or else they were just spoiling for trouble and thought your distress call was it."

But Ed was wrong and I knew it. That wintry January day was too cold for good calling. The moisture on the call froze up repeatedly and a thin tremulo shriek was all that emerged for the first half-dozen blasts. I tried to warm it in my pocket, but the moisture froze almost instantly on exposure to air and the false notes in my calling kept the crows at a safe distance.

To know precisely what notes a crow will answer to is no easy matter. While you practice the mechanics of calling, try them out on crows. If you find one series of calls keeps them at a distance, that should automatically taboo that call. But when you find that a crow jumps off its perch and comes hustling over pell-mell, that's the time to memorize the call that turned the tide and use it often.

The longer you practice the better you'll get, and by "better" I mean that you'll be able to control both the tim-

bre and volume of your call. In general it is best to soften the call as crows draw near. Not only is it easier to conceal your own whereabouts but it keeps the birds coming in at full speed—until you rear up beneath them with spouting shotgun.

But if you—like one of my Texas fans—find your call scares away about as many birds as it brings in, it's time to throw it in the deepest ditch and try another call or at least go back over these instructions and even engage the advice of a friend to tell you what you're doing wrong. If all your efforts are in vain perhaps your forte is not crow calling.

However I would never discourage anyone from continuing his practice in attempting to call crows. Success will open such a wealth of sporty and game-saving shooting that it might be a good idea for some organization (such as Ducks Unlimited) to sponsor an expert caller who could travel the width and breadth of the United States, giving lessons and distributing

calls. Many sportsmen's organizations would gladly sponsor such a visitor to their territory and would supply him with local information as to the exact location of roosts. A week or more spent with various interested sportsmen, tutoring them in the proper technique of calling and shooting from blinds would pay huge dividends in game bird appreciation and would likewise furnish a splendid outlet for out-of-season gunning.



Kill a crow, and you can brag about it, for Jim is a wily rascal. Crows, full grown, are big; the average length is almost 20 inches.



Right—Nearly half of the states pay bounties on crows—something like from three to 25 cents.