



a G & A Special Report by Bill Clede

The crow is one of the most highly developed species of the class *Aves*. He is adaptable, even thrives on the encroachment of civilization. His body configuration is a better flight design than that of many of his kindred. And he's a damned smart bird. You can escape the notice of a duck just by sitting still in front of a confused background.

Not so with Mr. Crow. He will pick you out of that jumble of confusion and identify you. He can see the shine of your face peering out from a leafy hideaway. He can spot the straight line of your shotgun barrel and shy away from it. He knows that nature abhors a straight line almost as much as she does a vacuum. The crow has such a discerning eye that he will pick out the change in his accustomed feeding grounds when you put in a blind. And it puts him on his guard until he gets used to it and accepts it as part of the general configuration of the landscape.

These qualities add up to a bird that will challenge your greatest skills as a hunter and marksman. If you can carry off a successful crow hunt, then you are good enough to hunt any game bird alive.

"Crows are a poor man's duck hunting," says Bob Pugliese, news photographer for the Hartford (Conn.) *Times*. "Frankly, I'd rather shoot crows than do any other type of wing shooting."

Bob started out using crows as off-season practice for his Long Island Sound duck hunting. He wanted a target to sharpen his eye for those pitifully few weeks you are allowed to go out after a pair of palate-tempting waterfowl. But it wasn't long before the hunting of crows became *the* sport for him and the ducks just a bonus in season.

Like Bob, most of the gunners I know aren't satisfied by the two-few weeks of open season. So what can you hunt off-season? Crows. **continued on page 42**

CROW



S EVERYBODY'S SHOTGUN GAME

The crow . . . A much maligned bird that has been cursed by farmers and blessed by off-season gunners. While purist bird shooters gaze wistfully at their inactive bird dogs, the less-pure-crow-shooter fires box after box at these highly-trained, black bandits. Interested? Here's how to start your all-season fun.

CROWS

And you perform a service for conservation when you shoot them.

In the days of a wilderness America, crows were kept in check by natural enemies and the availability of food. The crow is basically a grain eater. He lives high off the hog when the corn crop ripens, but he will eat anything. You're bound to have seen the big black birds flying away from the carcass of a road kill as your car approaches — crows.

When civilization came, forests gave way to farmland, prairies to fields of grain. And everyone, especially the poultry man, thought it was a good idea to declare war on hawks and owls — the

very predators that kept the population check on crows.

The growth of agriculture brought the crow more food than he had ever known. And his natural enemies became fewer. It's no wonder that there are many times more crows in America today than when the Pilgrims landed.

Fortunately, hawks and owls are protected in most states now but the crow still has an edge. He is determinedly prolific. He has bounced back easily from big organized hunts. And he gets along fine in the suburban and semi-rural areas where shooting can't be safely done.

Need another reason? This ubiquitous bird, being a grain eater, followed agricultural development north into Canadian waterfowl breeding grounds and here he found a delectable supplement to his sparse Springtime diet.

A Department of Agriculture survey once showed that the crow destroyed nearly a third of one season's hatch of duck eggs. Hunters could never make such a dent in the duck population.

The Province of Alberta put a bounty on crows and crow eggs after that survey and over one million were collected. Ducks Unlimited, a sportsman's organization dedicated to the propagation of the species, launched a campaign to promote crow shooting. Literally thousands were killed in organized hunts throughout the mid-western grain states.

Ducks Unlimited survey figures showed that this all-out battle against crows had a marked effect on the increase in duck populations during the following seasons.

There is good reason for hunting crows — if you are looking to justify your activities.

The best part of it is that you can hunt crows all year long. And fall starts the best time of year for it, the time when it's easiest.

In the spring, crows are in small family groups hatching and raising their young. They are spread all over creation and it's not easy to find them. Crows are attentive parents so they listen to the demands of their offspring rather than your call so it's harder to lure them in close.

There are ways to pick up a few crows here and there in the spring but it's a hit-and-run tactic.

In late summer, crows start getting together. First the males gather. Then the females and youngsters band into small groups. These groups unite and the flocks grow to huge proportions. The family ties are broken and the resultant hunting becomes nothing short of terrific.

The problem, in the late summer and fall, is to find the roost tree.

Take out on a balmy evening with a pair of field glasses. Drive the byways

until you find a bunch of crows who seem to know where they're going. Try to follow them. You'll probably lose them but, at least, they will head you in the right direction. You'll likely spot another bunch that will again point the proper way.

Eventually, these fliers will lead to one spot. You might overshoot and suddenly see crows headed back the other way. Follow. You are looking for the place where they are congregating. That'll be the roost area. They might move about from day to day but, as long as the roost is undisturbed, they continue to use it. For this reason, *never* shoot into the roost tree.

Observe the flyways until you can find a hilltop hedgerow right at the edge of one of these flight paths and about two or three miles away from the roost.

No matter what technique you use, you must become part of the scenery yourself. When snow is on the ground, a white parka and trousers and a snow blind effectively hides the hunter. More ardent winter crow hunters even paint their gun with a white water-base paint that will wash off. A sheet with a head hole cut like a poncho can be used but it is always getting in the way.

At other times of the year, camouflage clothing is a must.

You can buy ready-made suits, some with shirt and pants and other with jacket and pants. They are offered usually in two color patterns, one predominantly green for summer use or mostly brown to match the fall or snowless winter colors.

If you have an old suit of olive drab coveralls you can make a camouflage suit out of it. Dab it with paint of appropriate colors to match the background you'll be in.

Camouflage netting is also available. It can be used to make a portable blind and ease your need for camouflage clothing but you'll find the clothing a worthwhile investment.

You still have to worry about your face and hands.

A pair of brown gloves will take care of your hands in winter. Camouflaged mosquito headgear will cover your face but, personally, I hate all of that netting hanging in front of my eyes — unless the mosquitos are really bad. Even then, I'd rather use repellent and dab my face with blotches of black and brown theatrical makeup. My wife is still wondering what happened to her leg makeup.

If you reach your hunting ground and find that you've forgotten the makeup, use mud. Stick sprigs off the tree you're hiding under into your hatband. Tape them around your wrist and under the gun barrel. You can hide the rest of the gun in your lap, covered by clothing.



Above: A small section of pipe serves as a weight to toss the string support for the owl decoy over a limb. A stone might not always be handy. Top: The owl decoy is raised high in a tree and lowered so it rests on a branch close to the trunk.



Winter crow shooting demands that minimum exposure to sharp-eyed flyers be given. Shotgun is covered with white water-based paint that can be easily washed off.



Above: This crow makes its last, fatal mistake as it is lured within shotgun range. This shot, however, will alert any nearby crows and they will avoid the area until everything settles down again.

Left: Summer, fall or winter, this scene is one that is familiar to crow shooters all across the country. The crow is hunted throughout the year.



This crow, although appearing relaxed, is constantly on the alert and poised for flight or raucous warning at first sign of danger.

Pugliese fixes his hiding place and arranges sprigs to cover tell-tale signs. After calling, he bows his head and listens for approaching caws. As often as not, he will shoot from the sitting position, unless it's flight time and he entices a whole cloud of crows to his decoy set.

Just as in duck hunting, decoys can spell the difference between bagging crows and going home emptyhanded. But the way you use decoys depends on the season.

In the spring and early summer, when crow families are rearing their young, the presence of an owl is an intolerable threat. A papier-maché owl, set on a limb near the trunk of a tree with a dead crow dangling below it, sets the stage for fanning the crows' hatred into a full-blown fire.

It looks as though the owl has just captured a luckless fellow. Coupling this sight with the high pitched, "caw, caw, caw," of a young crow in distress

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Electronic game calling, illegal in some states, is used with great success when supplemented with camouflage clothing, darkening of the hands and facial areas.



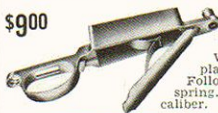
It takes considerable practice to fool crows with a blown call, but to the avid crow hunter this is all part of the game and offers still another facet to the hunt.

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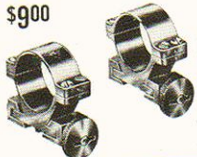
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CROWS

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will fire the anger of every crow in the area.

With lots of decoys, the riot call may convince passing birds that a real fight is going on below. And crows just naturally hate to pass up a fight, particularly when an owl is the one under attack. Because a riot is near hysteria to a bunch of crows, it takes an electronic caller playing a recording to give this one convincingly.

The distress call works best for hunters using reed calls.

Late in the summer or fall, crows range farther and the youngsters are joining the flock. Owls are tolerated although you might still be able to get a fight started. But this is the time of budding-up and the gregarious crow is following his instinct to join the crowd.

In this season, you'll often have more success by setting out a bunch of crow decoys in a feeding situation and giving the "Hey, soup's on" call.

For both owl and crow decoys, nothing beats live birds but only the most ardent crow shooter would bother with the care they require. A stuffed owl works better than a papier-maché one. Seems the wind ruffling the feathers adds a needed touch of realism.

Nicholas Karas, now assistant outdoor editor of *True*, tells of a taxidermist who built the ultimate decoy. He stuffed a Great Horned Owl and hinged the wings so they would flap.

Another elaborate owl was whittled from a wooden block, hollowed out and the head cut off then fixed on a balance shaft so a battery-powered motor inside could make it slowly revolve. This gave the bird an air of sagacious alertness that further infuriated the crows.

But a simple \$3 papier-maché owl will do the trick. Add several or a dozen \$1.50 papier-maché crows and you can set up a convincing situation.

The crow decoys should have a wire leg that you can just push into the ground. It is limber enough that the breeze will make them dip as though they are feeding.

Full-bodied crow decoys are more effective but you can make your own set that will serve the purpose. Cut a side profile silhouette from plywood. Add hinged side pieces to give a profile view from above. Painted dull black, these decoys are almost as effective as any others and collapse easily for transport or storage.

Don't forget the "sentinel" crow if you set out a feeding flock. One should be up in a tree on guard. His presence reassures other crows that all is well. A two-inch section of pipe for a throw-

ing weight and length of string is handy for getting the sentinel up high. And pull him up taut so he doesn't swing in the wind.

Dead crows themselves can be propped up for use as decoys. One crow shooter I know carries rough-hewn balsawood bodies that have wire legs. When he shoots a crow, he cleans him on the spot, pulls the carcass over this wooden body and sews it up. Makes the best kind of decoy—for a while.

You'll get arguments as to the best gun and loads to use on crows.

Many sing the praises of the full choke—and they're right, if you are pass shooting at a flyway. But if you're calling the birds in to your decoys, full choke isn't always the best. Even the more modern duck hunters are turning to a modified choke for decoyed birds. If your concealment is good and frenzied crows throw caution to the winds in their battle with the hated owl, improved cylinder would be better.

You're liable to get some demanding skeet shots, others just like long shots on ducks and even near-in, going-away shots like on upland game.

A variable choke device is a valuable aid. Then you can match the gun to the conditions you find in the field. If you must stick with one barrel, then the modified choke is best for all-around use for various conditions.

Shot size can vary all the way from 4s to 9s.

The crows body feathers are a good shield but the head is vulnerable. Many hunters prefer the heavier sizes that hold their punch longer, Pogliese uses No. 6s. Others prefer the greater number of smaller sizes in the pattern.


Since many of your shots will be head-on with wings open, I favor 7½ or 8 shot in 12-gauge trap loads. The 20-gauge magnums throw just as much lead. They are entirely suitable with shot sizes to fit the situation.


This is a good chance to use up your left-over No. 6 field loads. Even trap and skeet loads will reliably produce a killing pattern.

The variety of suitable handloads is as broad as factory fodder.

Using low brass, high base target cases in 12-gauge, 28 grains of Du Pont PB with an air wedge and one ¾-inch wad under 50 pounds pressure behind 1½ ounces of shot is a recommended load which works well.

For high brass, low base cases, use the same powder and shot charge with an air wedge, a .135 nitro and ½-inch filler wad under 50 pounds pressure.

Whatever gun you use the crow offers challenging practice for game hunting. Once you start, you might find yourself feeling like Bob Pogliese. . . This is so challenging it's more fun than the game you started practicing for. 



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