

# Crow Shooting is a Cinch!

By Hank Bradshaw

THIS IS THE STORY of black wings in the air, of wintry winds from the northwest, of the smell of an evergreen blind, and of fellows who knelt in it, shotguns loaded, and waited for the plummeting of crows into the decoys.

It's the story, too, of one of the most fascinating sports I've ever found. It's the closest thing to duck hunting I've ever tried—and what other sport can compete with duck hunting on the front pages of a sporting life?

Let me say right away that I'm not a wizzard at this crow shooting business. Three years ago, I tried it for the first time. But it's in the blood now and each day when the wind whistles and the smoke down town bends straight away from the chimneys, I hope Paul and Fred will call. I know, you see, that they'll be heading for a crow blind. And they ARE wizzards!

Fred Carlson, in his lifetime, has killed over 10,000 crows. Since he and Paul Chandler began hunting together five years ago, they were killed over 2,000. The Izaak Walton League has recognized them as the "Iowa champions," and when a crow sets his wings and heads for the "old hoot" in the tree above, you can bet your bottom dollar there's a crow headed for kingdom come. They shoot like I used to play marbles—for keeps!

There was a roost upstate with an abundance of birds in it and this pair had been shooting it about once a week. Came February and the good crow shooting time in Iowa. Both Paul and Fred figured that now they'd get in on some of those 60 to 90 bird kills they had experienced in other years—near other roosts. But for some reason or other, plans always went wrong and the kill would run only about 30 to 40 birds, or less, per shoot.

They were telling me about this gang of blackfeathers one night and we decided to make a steadfast try for the "east" birds. We would hunt three of the next six days, alternating, and move the setup according to the flight of the birds each time. With our hunts coming that close together, we figured we'd hit the jackpot on about the third trial—because crows ordinarily don't change their habits overnight. It usually takes them about ten days to completely switch around from something they've been doing. At least, that's what Fred and Paul think.

Coming into a roost, the birds fly from all directions. Paul and Fred had been studying those birds which flew back to the roost from the south and that bunch of birds which came in from the east. They'd never shot at those coming from the west and north.

Naturally, a crow hunter never fires into a roost. That's one thing a crow will change in a hurry. Shoot one night into a roost and you won't have the slightest idea where the birds are going to roost—or what flyway they'll use—the next night. We were going to make our setups on the east flyway.

The last time Paul and Fred had been here, they set out



First comes the building of a good blind



Then the decoys are placed up in a tree



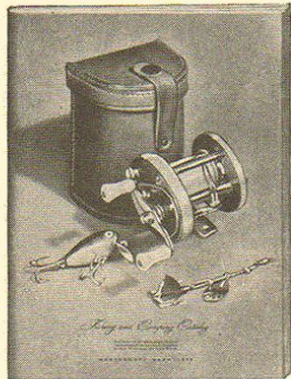
Fred takes aim on a high-flying crow



He connected, too, and retrieves the bird



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## Crow Shooting

(Continued from preceding page)

quite a ways south of a wide, sloping low area, cradling a creek at its deepest point. Willow trees, with sparse ground cover, spotted the banks of this creek. And it was through this lowland and up this creek that the crow express, thousands strong, made its way the last time Fred and Paul watched.

Now we set out along the banks of that creek—owl, stuffed crow decoys and all.

Let's keep in mind that our purpose was to kill 100 crows. The purpose of this story, though, is to portray how dog-goned smart a crow really is.

Fred had the "old hoot" in the top of one of the willows and Paul and I had an evergreen shelter built against the northwest wind and under the spreading limbs of another willow. We were well-sheltered, and the brown reeds around us concealed the green of the Christmas trees. All we needed were crows.

Right off the bat, one sailed its way down off a cornfield behind and to the east of us, swung in behind the line of willows, and high-tailed it for our blind, low and a half-mile a minute.

"You take 'em, Paul," Fred whispered. He didn't use his call. This crow couldn't miss the decoys. And he didn't. He saw that owl, and those crows sitting around on sticks. About that time, Paul's twelve-gauge let out a roar and the crow flopped like a weighted rock.

"Number one," Fred called. "Ninety-nine more to go."

That's what we thought! For another hour we hopped from one foot to the other and froze. At the end, we had only one more crow. And above us, on top of the hill to the south, went hordes and hordes of crows, ducking behind an evergreen grove up there and quartering into the wind toward a roost somewhere to the west.

We watched that string of traffic for awhile. It was a picturesque sight of black specks against the sky, flying low over the peak of the hill and disappearing on beyond the rise.

"Some of 'em are stopping to roost in those evergreens right there!" pointed Fred.

We could see them perched in the tree-tops—and that was the note on which we broke camp.

"They'll be coming over the graveyard from the south and heading right into that grove," Paul yelled. "Right where we were last week!"

"Yeah!" growled Fred, "and last week, they came down this draw!"

Off we went to the graveyard, packing our evergreen bows back up the creek to the car. By the time we reached the farmer's field this side of the monuments, where we set out, the flight was half gone.

But from the last half of that flight, we killed 23 birds.

Not a bad deal, we all agreed on the way home. But day after tomorrow, we would set out near the top of that south hill and catch the main flight. The wind probably would hold in this direction that long. No storm was predicted. Our 100 bird shoot was practically in the bag.

The next day went by—and the next

came. True, we had no storm. But the wind increased and the thermometer, despite the sunshine, sank until it was zero cold when we left home at noon. By three o'clock, when we laid out the spread behind the farmer's barn in front of whose house rested the evergreen grove, the wind had grown to a furious pace and it must have been ten below.

We parked the car in the corn crib and left the motor running. In the shelter of the crib, we built our blind—and set our "hoot" in the tree to the north. Whenever our bones half turned to ice, we slipped out of the blind and into the car for a spell. That's how we all caught cold. But it was worth it. We got 33 crows.

Thirty-three, you ask? Where's the rest of the 100 shoot? Off to the north, still alive, traveling right up the creek draw where we originally set out a couple of days before!

Thousands hugged the ground as they by-passed us by a hundred yards, slowly and maddeningly maneuvering their way against the gale. From this great horde, a small string of the birds split off and swung down the fence row, in front of us by 150 yards, and bent around to our right to enter the evergreen grove from the direction of the farmer's front porch. Probably five hundred birds. We were, figuratively, "caught in the divide"!

Our shooting came from those we could entice close enough, drawing on both flights with Fred's clever calling on his homemade lure and his continual tossing of dead crows into the air.

That's a trick for you! And it works, nine times out of ten. Get a crow close enough, throw a dead crow high into the air above your blind, and begin calling as the crow falls. The live crow will come like a plumb-line if he saw the falling crow. Anyway, 32 of them did. I've forgotten how we got that first one.

Came Saturday! We had it all doped out. This time we couldn't lose. The wind still blew from the same north-westerly direction, steady enough to keep the crows close to the ground. The temperature had moderated until it was livable outside. The heavy greens and dull browns of winter, patched here and there by a telltale drift of unmelted snow and by an overcoating of yellow corn-stalks, broken and bent, made one feel that the outdoors was the place to be—particularly right now!

Today we would trap that east bunch! Today, we had them fixed for sure.

Along with us went Bill Harnagel, a deadeye dick from Des Moines. He and Paul would set out over the hill, east of the farmer's corn crib and on the fence line across which the crows must fly to go either behind the evergreens or to angle off to the right and go down the creek draw.

Fred and I would go down in the corner on the same fence row but about two hundred yards south of Paul and Bill. We would set out with other decoys at the corner where the birds made the right angle turn a couple of days before to enter the grove from the farmer's front porch. And from here, we also could call, with the wind in this direction, the group sailing over the graveyard.

It couldn't miss!

Early the crows started. The scouts





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came over. Fred called one down. Then two. Fred almost never misses. And he didn't now.

Up north, we heard Paul and Bill bang away a couple of times.

Most of the early birds came from over the graveyard. Fred called them in and shot them and I shot with a camera. Soon, Fred had killed eight. He had shot nine times. Ever shoot crows? Ever hit eight out of nine?

It was still early when I had taken enough pictures to illustrate a book. I picked up my gun. It was then I noticed Fred shaking his head, slowly.

"What's the matter, Fred?" I asked.

The grizzled veteran of field and stream shook his head again and looked at the floor of our blind. "Something funny," he said.

"Funny?"

"Those east crows are gathering over there someplace," he waved an arm to the east, "and they'll come through here all in a bunch—if they come." He paused a moment. "If they come," he repeated.

"If they come. . ." I began. I hadn't had a shot!

The stragglers from the south quit. "They're gathering beyond the graveyard," Fred murmured.

For an hour we waited and we saw not one solitary crow.

"We shoulda driven around and found the gathering spot and scared them up," Fred murmured, stamping his feet. It was getting colder as night crept on us.

Then: "Look!" I saw them. Low over the top of the hillside to the east of us, still far away, fluttering and tacking into the falling wind, they came. Ten thousand? Twenty thousand? What did it matter? Know where they went?

To the north of Paul and Bill. A hundred yards north! On the crest of the hill north of our creek draw! Crazy crows! They sailed over there, a great block of black wings, unheeding the crying, wailing calls of our two hunting pals. Oh, near the tail end, Paul called one over. That's all that saved the day for them. And it gave us a thrill.

When Bill shot that crow, it changed the tide of the fight. The final squadrons backtracked, turned, twisted, and sailed right over our blind, gaining altitude as they flew against the now almost dead wind. When they passed above us, they were pinpoints against the blue. One came within gun range, but we wanted a dozen and let him go. The flock went, too. We never fired a shot.

A moment later, the graveyard bunch sailed over, high as could be—and we watched them go.

It was dark when we counted up our crows. Seventeen in the two groups! And we wanted a hundred. We had the wily scavenger all figured out. It was a cinch! Seventeen birds!

"Ya know, Fred," Paul said, scratching his head, "next week why don't we set out down east about a couple of miles and try to catch them at about the spot they must have gathered tonight? At about that crooked creek down there?"

Fred looked off over the horizon. "Might be all right, Paul," he said, slowly, pondering. "Might be all right."

That's crow hunting for you. I told you it gets in the blood!

THE END

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