

FARM COUNTRY CROW SHOOTING

A guide to calling and shooting,
and the choice of guns and loads

By Carlos Vinson

I have always detested the word "exterminate" in connection with any wildlife. I do not advocate the annihilation of any kind of bird, animal, fish, or reptile.

On the other hand, there are species that must be controlled. The common crow is one of these.

Crows have comparatively few natural enemies, and disease has never so far been known to thin them down to any noticeable extent. They increase fast enough to cause over-populations if they are not kept under control.

As I see it, shooting is the most satisfactory method of crow control. And it is definitely the most sporting method.

The farmer's pest

Crows can do a lot of farm damage. And it is a well-known fact that they do a lot of small game damage, especially in duck breeding grounds, and to ground nesting birds such as quail, pheasants, and grouse. An old crow can find more bird nests than any house cat that ever took to rambling.

In this piece we deal primarily with farm country crows—the crows that nest and raise their broods in the farm areas—as these naturally do the most farm crop and upland game bird damage.

Only last summer a neighboring farmer sent for me. Two flocks of the

black pests were playing the wild in one of his fields of late corn. A conservative estimate was 25 bushels of corn ruined. And this was done by two families of crows—one of seven, and another containing six. Each meal for the crows meant a dozen or more fresh ripening ears of corn ruined. What grain they left on the ears soon soured and rotted.

I answered the farmer's call and in two afternoons whittled the family of seven down to two, and the family of six down to three. The remaining crows from the two families departed the area entirely, and the farmer was a happy man. I can now hunt squirrels and bobwhites and cottontails on this 150-acre farm any time I wish, in season.

Farm country crow shooting, as a rule, is quite different from shooting in the big roost and concentration areas. Farm country crows stay scattered over a wide area, especially during the spring, summer, and early fall seasons, and the lush flyway and roost type of shooting is usually not possible. The farm country crow shooter has to depend on getting a few shots here, a few more there, and still a few more over yonder. Only in rare cases will he be able to stand in one spot and uncork a whole box of shells at "caw'ing" crows overhead.

Not one farmer in 50 will object to crow shooting on his place. Practically

all of them welcome it. Non-farming shooting fans in many areas make arrangements with a dozen owners of adjoining farms to shoot crows in their cornfields and wooded areas, and in that way do not have to ask individual permission on each trip.

A good call is needed

A good crow call and know-how in using it play a mighty important part in successful crow shooting. Those long shots with varmint rifles are shooting sport deluxe, but better headway can be made in thinning down crow populations with shotguns.

With practice, anyone can learn to call crows successfully. There are quite a number of really good crow calls on the market, and any of them will do the job successfully *if blown right*.

After experimenting with a wide variety of crow calls, I have to cast my vote for the wood calls, as it seems to me they have a more natural tone. However, I have called in a lot of crows with calls made of plastic, and must say they are more durable and not as subject to reed sticking as the wood-bodied calls.

One must have at least a fair knowledge of crow language to call crows successfully. This knowledge can be gained, of course, by listening to crows

"caw" while they are in their various moods and taking notes on what the various calls mean. Here are some crow language notes that may help.

The crow warning signal should be considered first. It goes something like this: "Ca-ca—caw—caw—caw". Approach a flock of feeding crows and the sentinel will sound that short double "ca-ca" note first as he swoops off his perch and goes "caw'ing" away with his alerted buddies following him. Naturally, to sound this call while crow shooting will prove fatal.

Not any old random series of squawks and "caws" sounded on a crow call will bring crows into shooting range. Maybe an occasional straggler curious enough to investigate "just what the dickens it's all about", but definitely not very many.

During the nesting season the fighting call is one of the very best to sound on the crow caller. And it need not be preceded by the rally call.

Locate a crow's nest in some farm area woods, try to scare the sitting crow from her nest and down her before she has a chance to sound her warning "caws", and the rest is usually easy. When I find a nest, I toss up a stone or stick to scare off the sitting crow and then try my best to bring her down with one shot as she beats a retreat. As a rule, crows scared from their nests will not sound warning "caws" until they are well out of gun range. If I succeed in bringing down the sitting crow, I immediately seek the best natural blind near the nest tree and start sounding the crow fighting call.

Some useful calls

The fighting call goes something like this: "Cawrrrr-rr-rrrr-rr-caw-rrrr-rr-cawrrrr-rr". The sequence should be as nearly unbroken as possible, and it will take some practice and a lot of wind to master the call. However, it will almost invariably bring half a dozen crows (sometimes more) in to where they think a crow nest is being disturbed, and if the call is well given they will come dashing in almost blindly. When the shooter is well hidden, it pays to wait until at least three or four crows are "caw'ing" overhead before opening up on them. I can get four or five shots at a good nest stand of this kind before the survivors leave the area.

The crow rally call (six short "ca—ca—ca—ca—ca" notes) followed in about two seconds by the fighting call will often produce excellent results around the edges of farm woods very early in the morning or late in the afternoon.

It is here that an owl and crow decoy set really pays off. Set the dummy owl in a bush where crows can see it from

overhead, and around it place two or three crow decoys. Hide well in natural cover near the spot, and then proceed with the rally and fighting calls. Every crow in the area will think some of his buddies have found an owl to torment, and there's nothing that crows delight in more. I have shot as many as eight or ten crows from one such stand early in the morning or late in the afternoon, and in most farm sections the shooter can set up several stands in one morning's time. They should not be spaced closer than half a mile.

When the young crows have left the nest, the farm country crow shooter can really go to town. Flocks of young crows are easy to locate, and easy to approach. Where they are interfering with farm crops, it is usually best to shoot in the woods nearest to the crop damage. The squawking young crows will invariably head for the woods with their parents when flushed from the fields, and that is where the shooter should go into action.

The plan of approach

Instead of rushing right in after them, however, wait for five or ten minutes and then ease into the woods as near as possible to the jabbering young crows without flushing them. Wait a few more minutes, then ease ahead far enough to scare one of the youngsters. He will likely be within easy gun range when he takes off in clumsy flight, but do not shoot at him. Instead, listen to his cries of alarm as he hastens away. While the young crows are settling down again, select a good blind with a clear overhead field and then try to imitate the distress cries of the young crow with your crow call. Keep it up, and chances are both parent crows will come dashing in to where they think the youngsters are in distress. The ever-suspicious parents will not come unless the young crow's distress jabbering continues for a long period. A flushed young crow will not usually let out over a dozen alarm cries in making a getaway, but if the cries come from one spot long enough the parent crows are almost sure to investigate. And after the parents are brought down, it is usually an easy matter to follow up and knock off the youngsters by sounding the rally call in a low tone and adding an easy "caw-ahh" to it.

While there are several more calls in the crow vocabulary, we have described enough for successful farm country crow shooting. Listening to crows sound the different calls themselves will give good ideas on pitch and tone, and some practice at home with the crow caller will not hurt.

Never slam car doors near where

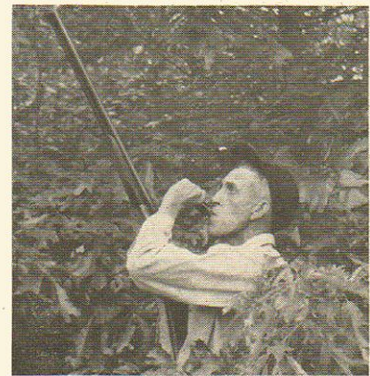
crow shooting is to be done, and be careful of the clothing worn. Oxford gray, forest green, brush brown, or dark khaki are the best colors for crow shooting clothes. Don't wear white or any bright colors.

Windy weather is always poor crow shooting weather, especially in farm country, and very hot weather is also a poor time, especially during the middle of the day. Stay in the hollows or on the hilltops when shooting in hilly country and avoid the hillsides as much as possible. Also try to avoid shooting near noisy streams, and never try to shoot crows near roads or highways.

Guns and loads

And now we come to one of the most important parts of crow shooting, the best guns and loads to use.

Any good 12-gauge shotgun will fill the bill successfully. Pumps or auto-loaders are better, but a lot of crows are killed with doubles and over-unders. I use the same 12-gauge over-under that I use for my small game and duck hunting, and it has given me excellent results. It has 28-inch improved-cylinder and modified barrels. If I had to recommend a specific type of shotgun for farm country crow shooting, however, it would be the autoloader. With several "caw'ing" crows overhead at the same time, those quick extra shots come in mighty handy.



For crows I use high-velocity loads carrying No. 6 shot. Some of my buddies have switched to the newer magnum loads with good results, but I have not found this necessary. I use the same shells for crows that I use for squirrels and rabbits. However, it is important to note that a shooter with great experience in this field recommends No. 7½ shot over No. 6, and skeet loads with No. 9 shot as best of all. The reason is the positive kills obtained because the crow is struck by so many more shot pellets than from any other load. —■