

# "Off-Season" Duck Hunting!

By Bert Popowski

**Mr. Sportsman, when the game season closes don't sit around and complain about poor hunting. There's an important off-season job you can do that will assure better gunning when the next season rolls around**

Many of the nation's hunters have put their guns in the closet and taken to the "soap boxes," preaching against this group or that one for not having done something to improve the hunting this past fall and winter. Sure, the past season is fresh in their minds, and visions of the coming season are blotted out. But there is another group of hunters who is holding its tongue and working—working at the perpetual job of maintaining game and waterfowl stocks at levels to assure decent gunning.

Take Mr. Average Duck Hunter as an example. He buys a federal duck stamp and a hunting license and he's ready to reap his autumn's harvest of webfeet. When the ducks fail to appear he grows choleric about the situation and the fewer ducks he gets, the more he rants and raves. I ran into such a gentleman last fall.

"Don't tell me I haven't done my full share in keeping up the duck crop," he yelled. "I gave \$25 to Ducks Unlimited, I bought a federal duck stamp, and I bought a regular hunting license. And I got exactly three ducks out of a dozen hunting trips!" Having delivered himself of this tirade he chomped viciously down on a well-bitten pipe stem and stomped away. He was in no mood to listen further so I let him go without another word.

But a week later, I found him in a mellow mood and I decided the time was ripe to do a bit of plain and fancy needling.

"Let's go hunting on Saturday," I suggested gently.

He reared straight up behind his desk and glared at me.

"You know damn well the season is over," he challenged. I nodded.

"Yeah, but there's another season coming up and I thought we might insure ourselves a few ducks for opening day, or shortly thereafter."

"What do you mean?" he demanded.

"Maybe you've got about a hundred shells that you'd spend in the interests of better duck hunting," I needed.

"I've got a case of shells that I'd gladly give away if I could just be assured of one day when I could bring in my limit of mallards," he committed himself. That was just what I was waiting for.

"I'll pick you up about ten o'clock Saturday morning. Bring your gun and

maybe you'd better bring along about 200 shells." Before he exploded with curiosity I walked out.

I had four phone calls from him before Saturday rolled around. To all his questions I had only one answer: "I'll pick you up at ten on Saturday."

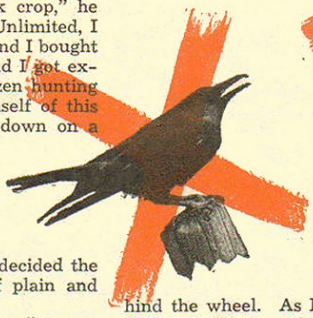
Saturday dawned crisp and clear, a light wind ruffling the leaves where squirrels were hiding the last of the walnut crop. I made a brief stop at the gas station and the hunter-operator looked askance at my booted feet and wool shirt.

"Doesn't look to me like you're dressed for the office," he observed.

"I'm not," I admitted, handing him some bills.

"Where you going?" he demanded.

"Duck hunting," climbing in be-



Check off Mr. Crow and you'll find that your chances of a limit duck kill will be improved

hind the wheel. As I looked back I saw him standing there, his slack jaw indicating a doubt of what his ears had heard.

There were just three of us in the car: John, the Old Duck Hunter, and I. He'd been sitting on his steps when we drove up. I looked approvingly at the bulging musette bag tugging at his shoulder as he stomped down to the curb. He tossed the bag and gun in the rear seat and climbed in beside me.

"Beautiful day," I offered.

He grunted, eyed me suspiciously, and decided to play hard to get.

Forty miles on I turned off the highway and took to the gravel. Ten miles of that and I turned off along a farm lane. John opened a barwire gate for us and I looked at the Old Duck Hunter, grinning.

"Where in Heaven's name do you think you're going?" demanded the Old Duck Hunter. "If you think I've come all this

way to go rabbit hunting you're nuts!" I shook my head, rolled the car off on the shoulder and climbed out.

We walked a half-mile through the brush, until it thinned into an open swale. Beyond was a thick stand of willow and through it glistened the waters of the muddy Missouri.

In the middle of those willows we stopped and I sniffed at the rank poultry-yard odor around us. The willows bore tell-tale splashes of white and the tops were pruned and broken down to the heftier branches perhaps 8 to 10 feet from the top.

John, an old hand at this, pulled a corn knife out of the pack basket and set out for the swale. When he got back carrying a couple of armloads of the yellow marsh grass, the Old Duck Hunter was sitting on a stump, tamping tobacco into his craggy briar.

Methodically, we set about fashioning a blind, laying a branch across the forks of two willows about eight feet apart and leaning other branches against it until we had a firm wall.

On this we draped the marsh grass and then covered it with some willow tops that still bore the leaves they had borne during the summer. When we were done we had a single

wall of cover, facing out over that swale and perhaps a dozen yards in from the edge of those willows. Four paces behind us the Old Duck Hunter still rode his stump.

"How's for some coffee," I suggested briskly.

"Just tell me what we're here for. This suspense is killing me," he remonstrated, plaintively. "It looks like a blind but I can't imagine what for."

"Just drink up, then break out the 200 shells I told you to bring," I suggested. "You're going to use 'em up so have 'em handy."

A crow called off in the distance, then two more chimed in much nearer. John looked at me, ran in a gunfull of shells and quietly squeezed one into the barrel. Those two crows sounded off again, not over 100 yards away.

"Get in here (Continued on page 77)

## "Off-Season" Hunting

(Continued from page 23)

and stick some shells into your gun," I muttered. "And, be quiet."

The crows came sliding in without a sound. John poked one full of holes as it frantically back-pedaled; the other dove down below the willows. My call shrieked for help and I saw that survivor swerve around and start back. Another crow joined it and the two came on, sliding down at us like a fireman riding down a brass pole.

"Take it," I mumbled, nudging the Old Duck Hunter.

His gun came up with the smooth, unhurried motion of a good hunter. It followed that crow for a second and then I saw feathers spout as the shot came connected. John's gun cracked a split-second later and the third crow did a nose dive.

"That's fun!" he admitted, stuffing a fresh load into his gun. "Are there any more crows around here?"

In answer I pointed to the splattered willows.

"Maybe a couple of thousand," I admitted. "We ought to get maybe 40 or 50 if you can shoot like you did on that first one."

"Oh! I can hit 'em," he admitted with becoming modesty. "Just get 'em in here!"

"Get that one," I murmured, nodding to one that had slid in without a sound. The gun came up, the crow dove, the gun roared and the crow rode out of there as if it had a burr under its saddle.

"Say, they aren't as easy as I thought," he muttered. "They don't rear up and climb like mallards, do they?"

The Old Duck Hunter and John hammered away at the crows I called in. Four crow carcasses swung and swayed in the branches of the tallest willows behind us and it was at these cadavers the incomers pointed their mournful squalls.

The Old Duck Hunter was interested, then pleased, then delighted. He exulted when he connected, swore when he missed. But he never failed to stuff fresh loads into his gun and look around eagerly for the next birds. He took the birds on his side of the blind and never offered to steal a loner that swung over John. His blind department was perfect.

When he broke open his fifth box of shells, he grinned at me.

"Good thing I brought along 200 shells," he admitted. "Sa-aa-ay, how many of these critters have we killed?"

"I just call 'em. I can't count," I admitted.

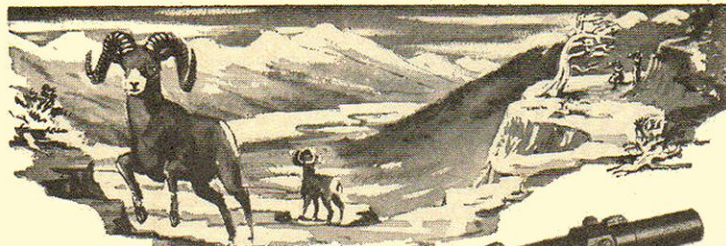
"I counted 143," offered John.

"If you want to make this a crow shoot, you'd better bear down," I warned. "Not much daylight left and I can hear 'em ganging up out there."

An hour later we were back at the car. We'd nudged 207 crows out of the sky and the floor of the blind we left had been nicely littered with spent hulls. The Old Duck Hunter was jubilant and could hardly hold still enough for me to refuel his coffee cup.

"Best shoot I ever had," he kept repeating until I thought his needle had stuck. "When can we go again?"

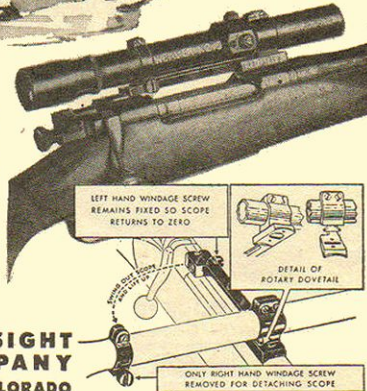
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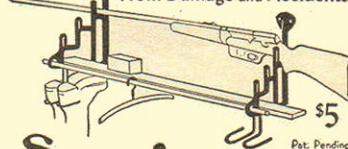
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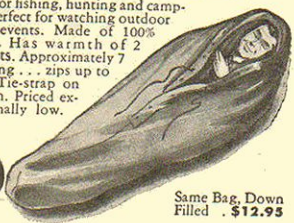
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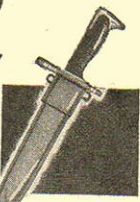


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"I'll take my car. Pick you up at ten. Or do you think we ought to go earlier?"  
"Not much point in it. They don't come in until mid-afternoon. How does this compare with duck hunting?"

"Well, it doesn't put any meat on the table," he admitted. Then he brightened, "but it's sure a lot more shooting."

"Do you have any idea what we've been doing this afternoon?" I asked, while John reopened that barbed wire gate and we climbed atop the gravel. "We've been insuring ducks against having to battle those crows in raising their families up in Canada next spring."

"How do you mean?" he asked.  
Then I told him the whole story. And I'll repeat it here.

In 1934-35 a study of crow-waterfowl relationships revealed a loss of 59 per cent of the first nestings of ducks from all causes. Of this loss, 31 per cent was definitely attributed to crows! Since then, observations by Ducks Unlimited field men indicated that this loss of first nestings clung closely to 60 per cent year after year, and that the crow was responsible for more than half of this loss.

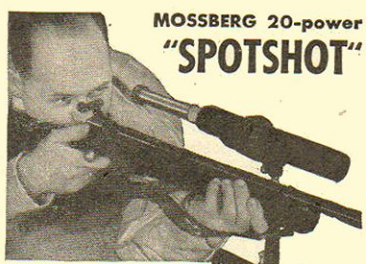
In 1940-41 Ducks Unlimited figures gave sportsmen more than an inkling as to the destruction engineered by crows. During that year crows were credited with destroying 16,300,000 duck eggs and ducklings in the major Canadian duck breeding areas. During the hunting season of that year the total kill of American and Canadian sportsmen totaled only a shade over 11,000,000 ducks.

But in 1946, after several years of rubber, gas and ammunition shortages, the crows had boosted their take of the potential duck crop to over 30,000,000 ducks. Of course the most active hunters had been in the service for months and years, and the remaining hunters couldn't get out to harvest as many webfeet. But the telling point is the fact that the crow populations during those same war years were virtually undisturbed and increased prodigiously. In net figures, the crow appetite for ducks had risen 170 per cent in six years time.

The webfeet can't stand it. If American sportsmen are willing to put up with this situation they can look forward to the near future of an entire flyway being closed to duck hunting as was the case in goose hunting in 1946 when the Mississippi flyway was closed to honker hunters.

Now Ducks Unlimited is not to blame. You can't shoot or bomb crows in near proximity to duck nesting areas and have the webfeet happy about the noisome proceedings. They just won't stand for it. They'll try to nest elsewhere, in less suitable surroundings, or they will just not raise a brood at all during the season that such proceedings keep them disturbed. The best the Ducks Unlimited laddies can do is to destroy as many crow nests as possible near the duck-nesting sites.

The proper remedy can be applied in the United States, during the fall, winter and spring seasons when crows are ganged up in immense roosts. There they can be bombed and shot until the balance swings back to favor the luckless webfeet. It will not, as the old Duck Hunter pointed out, put any meat on the table; not during the years that the program is carried out to its successful conclusion. But as



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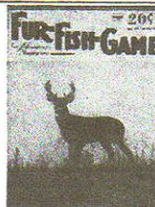
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the crow destruction of duck eggs is reduced for a want of sufficient crows to do the job, duck hunters can look forward to a New Deal in their favorite sport.

In short the story boils down to this: Ducks at their breeding grounds cannot be disturbed by the bombing or shooting-out of nesting crows. Even if the webfeet would stand for it, the black birds are distributed too thinly in verdure suitable to their own nesting so that a substantial or economical kill could be made by bombing. But in the winter roosts, where the crows mass so closely as to strip trees of their branches, bombing can destroy untold numbers.

In less dense roosts the shooting of crows is the accepted economical method of suitably reducing their populations. In the New England states, for instance, crows do not band up in the tremendous flocks that are characteristic of the midwest. In the east central states they gang up in flocks that are midway in size between the New England and midwest areas and these shooting out the numerous roosts of moderate size is indicated.

But it takes organization. Despite the many fine projects that are annually carried out in the Canadian Duck Factory areas, it is an insult to common sense to let the common crow annually harvest more webfeet than are bagged by all the expensive equipage of all American and Canadian sportsmen combined. In fact, the problem is ridiculously simple: if every duck hunter took it upon himself to kill as many crows as ducks the crow populations would readily assume their proper place in the wildlife scheme. Not in one year. But in ten years the job would be done.

One incentive to such crow control would be to put a bounty on crows commensurate with the destruction they cause to the farmers of the continent.

In suggesting a bounty payment for "good" crows I have often been asked as to where it should be set. From my own experience I feel that it should be somewhere between 15 and 25 cents per crow. There are a number of sportsmen in every community that can afford to pay for their sport of crow hunting, but the majority cannot. Yet all of them could be glad to do the job if it did not cost them money out of their own pockets.

Considering that a score of 50 per cent on crows is very satisfactory as an average over several dozen shooters, a bounty of 15 cents per crow would just about pay for the shotgun shells burned up. But if a real job of crow decimation is desired the thing to do is to put the bounty high enough so the skilled crow shooters become expert at the sport if there's some incentive to strive for.

The Old Duck Hunter is a skillful crow hunter now. He hunts ducks as he always has. But when the duck season comes to an end he turns to a more sporty target and does much more than his share in helping the webfeet. Yesterday we killed 219 crows. When black dark had closed down he turned to me with a grin on his face.

"I only killed seven ducks last season. But I've killed nearly 800 crows this winter and I figure I'm banking those crows against the ducks I'll get next year, and the years after that." **THE END**

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