

The glorious days of the market hunter are still with us! Here's fast-shooting sport that will make your pockets jingle

thousands of crows

by **BERT POPOWSKI**



The days of the old-time market hunter aren't yet over; he has a modern counterpart in the shot-gunner who can bring down scores, even hundreds, of feathered targets. I'm speaking of the crow hunter who collects bounties on the black head of our No. 1 pest—the common crow. These range from 10 to 25 cents apiece in many states, though farmers whose crops are hard hit by the marauding flocks occasionally raise the ante to \$1 a head (reasonable pay for exacting work; a two-bit bounty scarcely buys the necessary ammunition).

But then the hunter must consider the sporting aspects of crow hunting. For what other game can he shoot until his ears ring with the boom of his pet scatter-gun and his shoulder grows numb from its recoil? Yet still the targets come—cloud-darkening rivers of them, journeying north on their annual

migration. Such spring hunting is found across the breadth of the United States and southern Canada.

Although crow hunting of sorts can be enjoyed throughout the year, the two annual migratory periods bring crows in their highest concentration. The autumn flight, when the adults shepherd their brash youngsters southward in easy stages, usually passes through the northern states about mid-October. Weather determines the speed at which the flock travels: sharp and long-sustained cold calls for a substantially rapid pace, but when the temperature is mild the flight may take a month or six weeks to pass a given point. At this time of year, food is everywhere, gunners are busy hunting edible game and the weather is conducive to leisurely foraging and comfortable night roosts.

The spring migration is conducted similarly,
continued



with the birds falling eagerly on any winter-killed meat uncovered by the melting snow, plus grain and seeds. But the mating urge is also on them in the spring and they are inclined to fight and frolic. They seem glad that the long winter has finally broken and that banquets of the eggs and young of other birds will soon be theirs for the taking.

A big part of this spring migration is Canada-bound, chiefly into localities favored by wild ducks. The ducks nest in potholes and marshes, and the crows—their deadliest enemies—choose the nearest bits of scrub timber in which to roost. When the ducks move off in search of food, the crows come down to feed—on duck and upland-game-bird eggs.

Not long ago, at the invitation of Ducks Unlimited and the Federation of Sportsmen's Clubs of Manitoba, I made a late-spring trip to many of that province's choice duck nesting grounds. The primary purpose was to teach as many Canadians as possible the best means of keeping down the crow population. I spent just over a fortnight on that project, downed 2,000-odd crows and helped to train more than 30 crow callers and hunters to continue the campaign.

We hunted every day except Sundays, and each day we found anywhere from 21 to 47 despoiled duck nests. I had observed the wholesale predation that crows inflict on other avian life, but never before had I seen it so lethally concentrated on waterfowl. Many of the ducks whose nests had been despoiled probably re-nested more safely as grass cover gave them greater camouflage, but I suspect that a lot of these second nestings, due to the increased demand for food by the crows' young, were found and robbed.

One would think that the autumn migrations—when from three to five young accompany each pair of adults—would give hunters the greatest number of victims. I haven't found it so, partly because the young crows haven't yet learned how successful a mass attack can be, and also because the adults try to keep their fledglings out of trouble. Thus on fall migrations the young crows don't readily answer when a hunter blows the distress call. Instead, they follow the lead of their parents in getting out of trouble at the first blasts of a gun.

But as soon as the youngsters have learned what royal sport it is to harass a great horned owl, that a fox can be robbed of its fresh-killed dinner by their uproar and that many other animals and birds flee the bedlam of ganging crows, they're ripe for the call—and the shotgun. Not only have they had all winter to practice such mass attacks but, full of the exuberance of youth, they're ready



Even after scores have been downed, the remainder of the flight can be lured again and again into easy shotgunning range

The author's pet crow, Judas, acts as a decoy on hunts. The gunner is the late "Red" Watt, who aided in some of the 500-plus shoots



to swarm in whenever one of their number sounds the anguished call for help. Or when a hunter imitates this call.

At any rate, of these two migrating seasons, I've always had the biggest shoots in the spring. Two of them topped the 500 mark—556 and 527 in single afternoons, with four and three gunners, respectively, taking part. Crows came in so steadily that our barrels were almost continuously too hot to touch. They lay dead around us in a huge semi-circle almost 100 yards in radius and we were wading ankle deep in empty shotgun shells before the sport was over. (The best fall activity I can recall was one in which two of us killed 389 crows with just 493 shells.)

These spring-migrating crows have a real zest for living. The young have spent a winter cutting loose from their parental apron strings. They've learned the fundamental rules of gangsterism—intimidation, stealth, cunning and the value of a loud voice in a tight spot. Thus they revel in being part of every crow uproar that promises either food or sport. No doubt sex enters into it, too, for crows often pair up before they start their northward trek and court their mates along the way. So the distress call may be sent up by one of a pair of mated birds, with the partner coming over to help and yelling every wing-flap of the way for reinforcements.

The same thing applies to shooting nesting pairs, as we were doing in Canada. When a caller starts operating in the roosting area, the mates often come swarming in on the caller's invitation; one may arrive 50 to 100 yards ahead of the other or they may get there nearly simultaneously and present a very fast two-shot opportunity.

The key to getting the finest migratory-crow hunting lies in locating the groves the birds regularly use for night concentrations, roosts that have been in existence longer than the memory of living man. If the weather isn't pushing them, the crows are apt to use these roosts for weeks at a time, especially in the autumn. During the spring, unless weather to the north grows nasty, the competition for nesting sites results in shorter periods of occupation. The favorite roosting groves are always in isolated and/or sheltered surroundings. For while crows can stand fairly severe cold, they detest wind; thus the big old-time roosts are always in river-bed bottoms or on an isolated island.

Locating one of these big crow roosts is mainly a matter of good judgment and common sense. Roost-bound crows may pause and play in an exposed area frequented by hunters, but they're very

unlikely to stay there overnight, preferring more secluded surroundings. Such a temporary resting grove can provide an excellent shoot, especially if it is slightly isolated and has sufficient cover from which to fashion a good blind or two. For if the crows see the shooters before flying within shotgun range, only the called birds will come in.

Much has been written about the magnificent eyesight of crows. It is very good indeed, but not appreciably better than that of other avian wildlife—waterfowl, for instance. Both species will readily detect a blind that isn't built of native material or one that doesn't fully conceal its occupants. The effectiveness of a blind depends as much on the performance of the hunters within it as on its being inconspicuous.

My ideas on crow blinds are unorthodox, but they have worked very well for me. I prefer the lean-to type, with the sides slanting inward at the top. In thick undergrowth, all that's necessary is a front (downwind) side with added cover at the ends; in spots where there's no natural cover to shield the rear, I make the lean-to into more of a teepee, so that it offers concealment all around. If the crows come in fairly high, I can squeeze forward under cover of the slanting sides, merely leaning back on my right leg to take my shots as the birds approach the vulnerable dead-overhead position. Since those high incomers are very apt to be the wise old crows, I enjoy powdering them in a spot which, even if I miss, leaves them exposed to a second shot.

Unless the foliage surrounding it is on the low side, I prefer to build the blind just a trifle above shoulder height. On normal flights the crows come in to the call at an elevation which allows 25- to 45-yard shots to be taken at from 15° to 30° above the horizontal. On these I crouch a bit, keeping my face well screened by the top of the blind. As each shot offers itself, I rock back on my hind (right) foot and have an unobstructed poke at the target.

Most inexperienced crow shooters need to realize that mounting the gun must be done without jumping, lurching or twitching, motions that reveal the hunter to the oncoming birds. Sudden movements don't hurt your chances with ducks or geese, for you have only one chance to tie into a flock; it cannot be called back. But in crow hunting the reverse is true. If the lead bird is killed with little discernible motion on your part, 80 per cent or more of the trailers can still be lured in. The expert caller-gunner can shoot more crows by himself than with partners, for someone is almost sure to move at the wrong time and deprive you of the

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maximum per-gun kill. A good crow-hunting partner is not easily come by; the late "Red" Watt of Omaha was one of the best I've ever had. He was along on the days when we racked up the two 500-plus kills, and we must have had at least 30 additional shoots on which we hit 200 on a single afternoon, plus half a dozen more that averaged 300. But these big kills didn't just fall into our laps. They were earned by meticulous behavior in the blind, careful shooting and the kind of teamwork that often passed up easy singles in favor of getting from three to six trailing crows.

Shoots like that are less a matter of luck than of good management. Many of the roosts we uncovered were found in the late afternoon. We could have barged right in and shot maybe 50 to 60 crows—and we did if we weren't planning to return to the area for a week or so. But if we were setting them up for some really top shooting, we left the birds alone that first day, although we would watch them until nightfall. Then, a few days later, we'd get there in the morning with all our gear, build blinds according to the terrain and the direction of the wind and prepare for action.

Down in the peanut- and rice-growing sections of Texas, crow shooting is a very different proposition, for the land is a feeding area. Crows ordinarily eat twice a day; in the morning they bust out of their roosts before daylight and head for grub, which may be anywhere from a mile or two up to 30 miles away. As soon as they arrive they have a hearty breakfast and loaf around waiting for it to digest. In mid-afternoon they eat another big meal and then start in leisurely fashion back to the shelter and comfort of the roost.

To hunt crows successfully in this region you have to head for the feeding areas before dawn so that you'll be in place and ready for action at full daylight. You can arrive later, of course, but if you do, every crow in the neighborhood will view your blind setup with a suspicious eye. Then you'll have to wait until those particular birds have moved out and been replaced by unsuspecting newcomers. After that, depending on how well you've spotted your blind, you'll be shooting until mid-afternoon.

Such feeding fields are by no means confined to rice and peanuts, or to Texas. A friend of mine who lives in Virginia is paid a bounty of \$1 per head for killing crows that endanger the watermelon crop. Crows also feed on peanuts in Virginia, on soft-shell pecans in Florida and Oklahoma, and on anything else that they can digest. I once read a Bureau of Agriculture bulletin that listed more than 700 food items found in their craws.

A large crow roost is a never to be forgotten sight; the black birds pour into it from a dozen directions, working off their high spirits in games of tag, cawing so loudly that they can be heard for a mile or more. The din lasts as long as the roost-bound flight continues; it goes on until dark.

The clannishness of crows as well as their natural bent for gangsterism puts them at the mercy of a good caller. The distress call, of course, is a plea for help. The rallying call invites other crows to join in the attack on some animal—say a great horned owl, a house cat or a fox. And, finally, there is the discovery or come-back call, which I often use to attract crows that have been shot into; it apparently convinces them that some new target has been found to gang up on. I've seen crows attracted by this call almost spin around in the air in their eagerness to get back into the fray. While no one can become an expert caller overnight, an hour a day of practice, over a fortnight, should get the birds coming in.

How close can crows be called? Virtually within arm's length of a well-hidden caller—in fact I've had a crow brush my gun barrel as it whipped over the blind. And I've shot incoming crows as close as eight to ten feet from the muzzle, though I don't recommend that range for the best results. When things go right, the average shot is a 30-yarder.

For crow hunting your shotgun should be lightweight and short-barreled so that it can be swung easily to cope with the myriad types of targets the birds provide. Magnum shotguns and even Short Magnum ammo are an admission of poor blinds and inferior calling. In fact, I haven't even used standard game loads—except when that was the only ammo available—for the past 20 years. Trap and skeet loads suit me fine. I do, however, make two concessions to crows—one in bore size, the other in choke. I like a 12-gauge gun with either full or modified choke. This is because I delight in smacking the wary veterans that have been shot-stung and then hang out at the far edge of good shotgun range. But these old-timers come down beautifully when smacked with the dense pattern of skeet loads of #9 shot. In any event I have little use for shot sizes coarser than standard #7½ trap loads.

Crows aren't the easy targets they appear. But neither are they tough to kill if they're well tagged. When cruising the countryside they often appear slow on the wing, but as soon as they see a shotgun muzzle poking out at them, their broad wings and tails can lift their one-pound bodies into dizzying aerial gymnastics. Even an expert shotgunner has to be at his sharpest to take these pests consistently. ■