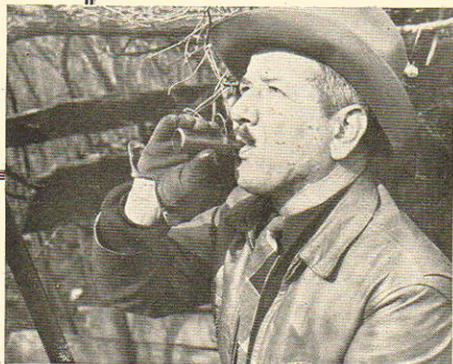


SAME CROWS— NEW TRICKS

By JIM MCKENNA

Ohio gunners have their own idea on how to get 'em—and boy, it works!



Lou is pulling them in on the beam with his reassuring talk

CROW SHOOTING was the furthest thing from my mind that week-end. The February snow lay three feet deep in the Lake Superior country and there wasn't a crow within 300 miles. Ravens, yes. A few of them hiding out in the evergreen swamps or drifting across the gray winter sky, croaking like ducks with sore tonsils. But no crows.

It was Lou Klewer who set my thoughts to wandering. Lou writes an outdoor column for the Toledo (Ohio) Blade. He was up at Blaney Park, in the upper peninsula of Michigan, that week-end, as a guest at the winter meeting of the Michigan Outdoor Writers Association. Fifteen or twenty of us went down a logging road into a snowing cedar swamp for a glimpse of half a hundred deer that were hanging out there, feeding on the cedar tops about as fast as the lumberjacks dropped 'em.

Lou and I walked back along the logging road to the sleigh. The snow was banked high on either side, unbroken save for an occasional deer trail. We crossed a small creek and stopped to watch the black, open pools. A bobcat track led down along one

bank, the round foot-prints evenly spaced.

"This would be good country for a cat hunt," I remarked, but I didn't put much enthusiasm into it. I was thinking ahead to May and the trout season. "Winter's a dull time up here in the north," I complained when Lou didn't answer after a minute. "Wouldn't it be nice if everybody could migrate to Florida for the next sixty days?"

"Oh, I don't know," Lou said thoughtfully. "I'd miss a lot of good crow shooting if I did that."

"You rate crow shooting that high?" I demanded.

Lou grinned. "Well, maybe not," he admitted. "Probably I'd take Florida if I had the chance. But crow shooting is a whale of a good winter sport, at that."

"Lot of crows down your way?"

"We figure we get about half the crow population of the Eastern United States within a thirty-mile circle of Toledo every winter," he said with a chuckle. "At least it seems that way.

And we take full advantage of 'em. No dynamiting, no shooting up roosts at night. We hunt 'em fair and square and have a lot of fun doing it. Matter of fact, those crows give us some of the liveliest shotgun business of the whole year."

"Crow shooting's O.K.," I agreed. "You get a good flight and knock down twenty-five or fifty in a morning and it's hard to beat."

"Twenty-five or fifty?" Lou jeered. "That's just a warm-up down our way. We don't count 100 crows an exceptional kill for two men in a blind. I've seen as many as 200 dropped in a day."

I was beginning to get interested. "How about snow?" I questioned. "Can you count on it all winter long?"

Lou shook his head. "You don't have to have snow," he declared. "Sure, it means better shooting. And the colder the day, the more crows you kill. But we don't wait on the weather or stay home because the ground is bare."

I DIDN'T exactly doubt his word but I was certainly surprised. I had done my share of crow hunting. I had crouched plenty of times in a brush or corn-shock blind in a wind-swept, snowy field, camouflaged like a ski trooper, wearing white jacket, white hood, white gloves, or even a white sheet draped over my regular hunting clothes. Once or twice I had lain in a shallow foxhole, scooped out of a fence-corner snowdrift, and relied entirely on a white outfit to deceive the sharp eyes of any crows that drifted over.

All my experience indicated—and the crow hunters I knew agreed with me—that it's hardly worth while to go out unless the ground is covered with snow. I said as much.

"Come down and shoot with us next week-end," Lou suggested. "Perhaps we can show you some new tricks."

Lou holds Bosco, their live coxer, so Fred can put on the bird's restraining yoke



We walked out to the sleigh, and my mind was 500 miles away from that cedar swamp and the deer yard. I was in a corn-shock blind in an Ohio field, and crows were slanting in one after another in a long straggling line.

LATE the following Sunday afternoon I drove into Toledo. I had come the last 100 miles through country that didn't have a trace of snow even along the fence rows. The weather was mild for early February. And I had seen crows roaming the fields by scores and hundreds, in big flocks, little bands, and roving pairs and singles. It looked like an ideal time to test Lou's claims.

"You've got a skeptic on your hands," I warned when I got him on the phone. "If you can show me any real shooting in this kind of weather I'll eat crow for dinner tomorrow night!"

"I hope we can get you a tender one," he said grimly. "We're going out to Fred Brint's place at Sylvania in the morning. Sometimes I think Fred knows more about crows than they do themselves. If we draw blanks tomorrow it'll be the first time I ever knew one of his hunts to fail. So you better figure out what kind of dessert goes best with crow and leave your order at the hotel!"

On the way out to Sylvania in the frosty, predawn darkness the next morning Lou briefed me on crow shooting as it's practiced in that part of the country. Fred Brint, he explained, is federal game protector for the state of Ohio, and a wizard as a crow hunter. "His first love is grouse, up in northern Michigan," Lou explained. "Crow hunting stands a close second on his list." Fred, he went on, had the blinds, the decoys, the portable stove, and the rest of the outfit. "And he'll have it all loaded on a light two-wheel trailer behind his car and be waiting for us when we drive into the yard," Lou predicted.

HE WAS right. We transferred our guns and gear to Fred's car, drove a few miles out of Sylvania, and turned into a farmyard where yellow shafts of light streamed out of the kitchen windows like welcoming beacons. We waited while Fred went to the door and

made known our mission, then we drove down a farm lane with deep ruts frozen in the mud. A quarter of a mile behind the barn we came to an open, brushy field strewn thick with papers, tin cans, and grapefruit rinds. Here, garbage trucked out from Toledo was being utilized to feed a herd of twenty or thirty hogs.

"It's not exactly pretty," Fred commented while we unloaded two portable blinds, a gunny sack of decoys, and other paraphernalia from the trailer. "But it's a natural for crows."

THAT was very easy to believe. Here was a banquet all spread and waiting, replenished each day with a fresh truckload of garbage. Here, in good weather or bad, all winter long, every crow in the county knew he was sure of a square meal. It seemed inevitable that we'd see a heavy flight as soon as daylight came. I still had doubts, however, as to the kind of shooting we'd get. In that bare and snowless field it seemed to me our blinds would stand out like the proverbial sore thumb.

I couldn't forget Jim Crow's legendary eyesight, his natural wariness, his suspicion of all things strange or new. I remembered the crows I had shot from a snow-mantled corn shock and how they had behaved. This bare-ground hunting just didn't make sense. We'd see crows, all right. How many we'd kill might well be another matter. But I had decided by that time to keep my doubts to myself. I shouldered one of the portable blinds and trudged off across the garbage-littered field, maintaining a discreet silence in the face of Fred's rosy predictions and Lou's hearty backing.

Fred's crow blinds deserve a word of description. They are made of an inner and outer layer of chicken mesh laced together, with a filler of coarse marsh grass between. They are just big enough to accommodate two men, without an inch of space wasted, and

high enough so that you must stand erect to shoot. They roll into a long bundle so compact that a man can carry them without difficulty.

Unrolled and braced with a stake or two on the inside, these blinds bear fair resemblance to a corn shock in shape and color. An inner lining of heavy canvas makes them windproof. With a small portable stove going inside, the hunter can keep an all-day virgil, snug and comfortable in the coldest weather.

We set one of the blinds at the edge of a patch of brush where it would fit into the background, and tucked the other out of sight under a thick clump of willows.

"We'll need only one to start with," Fred explained. "There's an old brush blind on the other side of the field. We'll leave Lou here, and you and I will go over there until we see how they fly and where they intend to feed."

(Continued on page 124)



Fred places one of the decoys in a low tree



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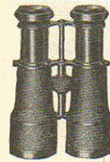


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Same Crows—New Tricks

(Continued from page 51)

Lou shook out the sack of plastic decoys and started to perch them in bushes and low trees in front of his stand. The eastern sky was beginning to turn gray now, and in the growing light I noticed a second sack take on sudden animation, moving around in short, erratic hops.

"Live owl?" I asked Brint.

He shook his head. "Live crow," he explained, "and I wish we had a dozen of 'em. I loaned all my live decoys except this one to a friend last week and he hasn't brought 'em back yet. So it'll be all up to Bosco, here."

"Don't you use an owl of any kind?" I demanded. Up in my country nobody would dream of hunting crows without a decoy owl, either live, stuffed, or a wooden imitation.

Fred shook his head again. "Crows don't work so good over an owl down here," he said. "Some days a little later in the winter a live owl will get you fair shooting. But I'd rather have eight or ten live crows staked out in front of my blind than all the owls in Ohio. Matter of fact, I'd rather use a hawk than an owl any day."

I recalled what Lou had said about new tricks, at Blaney the week before, and subsided into silence. After all, I reminded myself, no man can expect to know all there is to know about a subject as complicated as crow hunting.

We finished putting out the decoys and staked Bosco on a short line thirty yards in front of Lou's blind. Fred and I picked up our gear and started across the field for the permanent blind near the far fence. On the way, Fred paused

briefly to study the weather and sky.

"I doubt you'll get much shooting, the way the wind is this morning," he called back to Lou. "My hunch is most of 'em will come in from the south, over our blind. It'll depend a lot on where the fresh garbage was scattered yesterday. If you don't get a fight in half an hour pick up and join us. There's plenty of room for three guns over there."

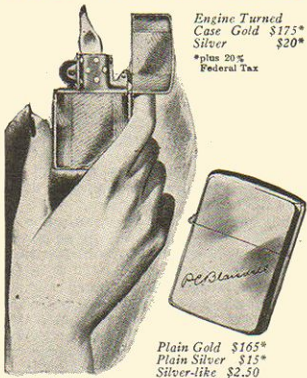
This blind turned out to be a triangular affair of weathered boards and brush, six or eight feet across, placed in a thicket of scrub oak in the corner of the field. It looked out on scattered heaps of garbage and had fine possibilities for a crow flight, but I was still skeptical about the shooting. The blind was fairly well hidden but I kept reminding myself there was no snow to camouflage things—and crows have sharp eyes!

But when I stepped into the blind my skepticism melted away. The frozen ground was carpeted with empty shotgun shells of assorted kinds, colors, and gauges. Offhand I'd have guessed a thousand rounds had been fired there through the winter. And then, under a thicket of brush in front of the blind, I noticed a mound of dead crows, much mauled and trampled by the hogs. There were maybe 300 or 400 in the heap.

Fred followed my look. "Been some good shooting here this season," he commented. I had nothing to say.

A band of rose was brightening in the east now. We hurried to get the decoys in place on fence posts and in low trees, but before we finished we heard, from a

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patch of woods off to the south, the sudden, loud fight talk of crows.

Fred kicked the empty decoy sack out of sight and we dived for blind. Crouching behind the oak brush, he lifted his call and broke into a harsh clamor, answering the distant flock. And with the first notes I understood why Fred Brin's crow hunts rarely fail. He was speaking the language of a lone and hungry crow at breakfast, urging the rest of the clan to come to the feast.

He called briefly, fell silent, called again. Then we saw the incoming birds above a distant field, fifteen or twenty of 'em in a straggling bunch. They came steadily on, and Fred coaxed and reassured them until they were slanting down, just beyond gun range. They circled once, and it was plain that some of the band distrusted our motionless decoys. But three peeled off and came over the blind, no more than thirty yards high, cawing as they flew. When they were fairly looking down our gun barrels we stood up and reached for them.

Fred's shot broke a split second ahead of mine. Out of the tail of my eye I saw the lead crow crumple and start down. I took two shots to account for my bird. When I looked for the third crow, it too was falling. I hadn't even heard Fred's second shot.

"Not bad," I remarked. "I'd never have believed—"

"That was as far as I got. Off to the south we heard more crows cawing, saw a big bunch coming in a long, ragged string. They were bound headlong for the breakfast table, and Fred gave them no chance to change their minds. He talked and pleaded and told 'em the coast was clear. Just beyond the garbage field they went out of my sight behind a clump of brush. Then suddenly there were a dozen crows overhead, yelling their lungs out as they drifted along.

"Take 'em!" Fred said in an urgent whisper, and I threw a salvo without getting off my knees. We accounted for four before they climbed frantically out of range, their alarm notes rolling across the frosty fields.

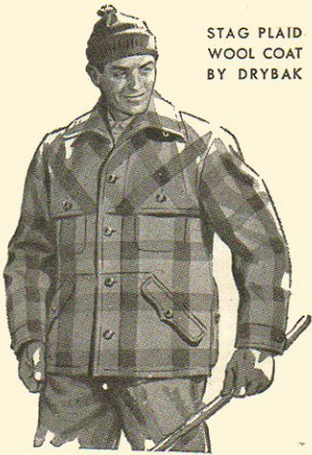
The flight was steady now. Crows were pouring in, mostly from the south, band after band coming from a distant roost.

One bunch of six or eight flew in as unwary as starlings, pitching straight down to the decoys. We emptied our guns into them and almost as soon as the survivors were beyond earshot we were shooting again at a cautious single that rocketed above the blind like a black comet. After that, two felt their way over, all but standing still in the air, studying the motionless decoys on the fence posts, cawing inquisitively. "The one to the left is yours," Fred whispered. "Take him—now!" And the blast of our two guns was a single, solid roar.

In the first half hour we heard Lou's gun only twice. "They're not working his way," Fred said at last. "This garbage is fresher. I'm going back and help him pick up, and bring him over here."

He was gone ten or fifteen minutes. In that interval I killed three crows without calling. Fred and Lou returned together, put out the extra decoys, and staked the live crow just beyond the fence. Fred set up a folding chair for himself in the thick brush just outside the blind, turned the stand over to Lou and me, and went back to calling. In five minutes we had crows over us again.

The bare ground seemed to make no difference. If, as I had feared, there was anything amiss with the rude camouflage of the blind, the crows had grown used to it in a winter of feeding



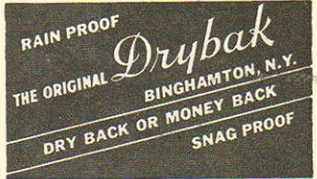
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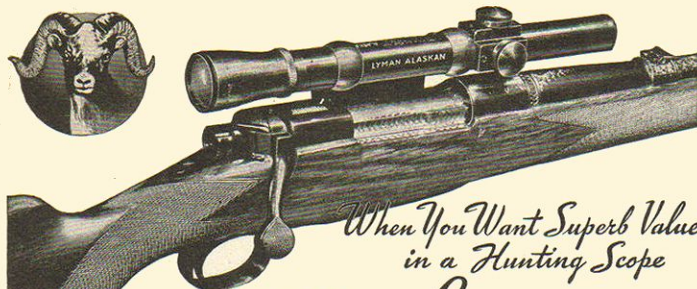
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there. They kept on coming, flock after flock, singles and triples, big bunches and little, and Fred tolled them in as if they were drawn by invisible strings.

"There's a mighty big roost of there to the south somewhere," Lou commented, when there was a brief lull.

The flight began to taper off after another hour. By midmorning the shooting was definitely slow, and we resigned ourselves to the fact that the fun was over until the scattered birds began to work back toward the roost in late afternoon. "We'll get an hour or so of good shooting around 4 o'clock," Fred predicted. "Meanwhile, let's pick up and drive into town for lunch."

That suggestion drew unanimous support. We were fixing things so nothing would be left within reach of the prowling hogs when we heard a truck rattling down the frozen lane, headed our way.

"Do you guys suppose you could postpone lunch for an hour or two?" Fred asked. "That's a fresh load of garbage coming out. It ought to mean some more good shooting. Word of that kind gets around among crows."

We agreed we could delay lunch. The garbage was scattered, and the truck drove away; and before it had reached the gate at the far side of the field, a lone crow came sneaking in, silent and unannounced, as if unable to wait any longer. He was just beyond our line of fence-post decoys, and he paid dearly for his greed.

We could still hear the clatter of the truck driving up the lane when the next guests arrived for the feast. There were five of them, hungry and noisy and careless. They slammed down in front of the blind—and only one got clear.

For the next half hour we had the fast, action-packed shooting of the morning flight all over again. Then, abruptly the stream of crows broke off, silence settled over the winter fields, and there was nothing to indicate that there was a crow in the country. We picked up and went to lunch.

We were back in the blind at 3 o'clock. But to everybody's surprise the afternoon flight failed completely to materialize. The day had turned cloudy and raw, the wind had changed, and the crows were somewhere else. We sat patiently for two hours without hearing so much as a single caw. We gave up, loaded the trailer, and started back to Fred's place.

Two miles away from the blind we intercepted a heavy crow flight, a long, irregular ribbon strung across the country, traveling to a roost for the night.

We parked the car, hid in the brush and weeds of a roadside ditch, and once more Fred went to work with his call. Most of the birds were high, but every now and then one got curious, detoured down and came racing above the ditch. It was fast shooting—much harder than we'd had over the decoys—but we killed seven crows while the flight lasted.

"Well," Fred asked on the way back to the car, "how do you like it?"

"How do you suppose I like it?" I retorted. "You've upset everything I thought I knew about crow shooting. Snow, white suits, live owl—all gone with the wind! These are the same crows I've hunted half my life, but the tricks are certainly different here in Ohio. All the same, I never had a better day of wing shooting."

Lou stopped in the middle of the muddy road and made a conspicuous business of dropping the two crows he was totting back to the car.

"For that," he announced with a grin, "we'll let you off. You've eaten enough crow for one day. You can have steak for dinner—with us!"

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