

When we join the local experts, man and boy learn fine points of placing decoys, rigging blinds, and using calls to pull in . . .

Crows Like Wildfire

By JOHN O. CARTIER



Al, Tom, Art, and my son Jack (from left) prepare to tote bags of gear from the levee to the site of our first blind



The boys add grasses and sticks to our camouflage-net blind
Fascinated, young Jack watches crows respond to Al's calls



ART PROVINCE wheeled his car off a paved road near New Madrid, Missouri, and turned sharply up a levee bordering the Mississippi River bottoms. The road on top of the levee isn't much more than a trail, but Art drives it often. He made a few turns, began slowing down, and finally stopped. He saw what he'd been looking for, and a grin crinkled his face.

"There they are," he said. "They're early today, but they're moving down the same flight lane they used yesterday. I watched about five-thousand crows go through here last night on their way to the roost. They're low tonight too. I guess we'll get plenty of shooting."

There were five of us in Art's car, and everyone reacted differently to the sight of that endless stream of crows dipping and twisting across the levee.

Art is a 50-year-old Missouri conservation agent, and he was relieved that his scouting had paid off. His son Jim, 24, on leave from the Marines, took the crow-shooting potential as a foregone conclusion.

"I'll help you fellows set up," he said. "Then I'm going to spend some time busting cottontails. I'll shoot a bunch of crows later."

Al Moreton, 65, owns a service station,

Al and Tom call almost continuously, varying tone and loudness





Missouri crows are smart, but close-up shots like this by Al are typical

motel, restaurant, and bulk-gas complex in Wyatt, Missouri. He's a lifetime hunter and doesn't take anything for granted, especially crows."

"They're smarter than the smartest goose that ever flew," he said. "We might get a great shoot, but don't bet on it yet."

I've been humiliated by crows scores of times, but this setup seemed unbeatable. Crows poured like a continuous wildfire over the horizon, hedge-hopping over the fields and heading east toward a roosting island in the river four miles away. It was a dark, dreary day in February, 1969, the kind of a day when crows maintain a flight pattern and head for a roost early. That spreads them out, breaks up the big flocks, and offers steady shooting. But I restrained my enthusiasm for the benefit of the fifth member of our group, my son Jack.

Jack was then 11 years old. During the previous couple of years he'd become fairly capable and highly safety-conscious with

the Model 12 Winchester 20 gauge I'd given him. When Jack heard that I was going to hunt near roosts where upwards of 100,000 crows congregated, he begged me to take him along. Right now he was bewildered.

We piled out of Art's car, grabbed duffel-bags loaded with decoys and camouflage netting, picked up shotguns, and hiked down the slope of the levee to a field of winter wheat.

A fence grown thick with vines and brush marked the border between the wheat and a cornfield. The fence ran straight for half a mile across flat land, and it was at right angles to the flight line of the crows. We walked 200 yards along the edge of the wheatfield and picked a spot in thick tangles directly under the flyway.

Jack joined Al and me in setting out 48 papier-mâché decoys while Art and Jim started building a blind. When Al was satisfied with the decoy spread, we began camouflaging the blind with dead horseweeds and brown grasses.

That's when I looked up and saw a dozen crows boring straight at us. They were within shotgun range when they suddenly spotted us and flared. But there's something about a flock of crows trying to decoy before you're ready to shoot that tells its own story. The story is that you're in the right place at the right time with the right rig.

When the blind was finished, Jim hiked off toward a swale with his 16 gauge Winchester pump to jump rabbits. Art and Al took the flanking spots in the blind, and Jack and I crouched in the center.

Al's hand call was sounding low, and I knew some crows had to be close. Then I spotted them, brushing across the green wheat and boring straight for us. Jack saw them and froze. Now the birds were over the decoys, their flight speed slowed and drifting dead on.

"Take 'em Jack," (continued on page 148)

We take time out periodically to hide dead crows in background brush



CROWS LIKE WILDFIRE

(continued from page 43)

I whispered to my youngster.

Jack snapped upright, but he didn't shoot. The crows didn't see us and they kept coming. They were 10 yards out when Al and Art realized that Jack wasn't going to fire. They popped up and their Model 1100 Remingtons echoed in unison. I heard a crow hit the ground, and at the same time I saw another flare above me. I touched the trigger of my Winchester over-and-under, missed, and then scored with the second barrel.

As I watched the crow tip, I was aware of Al frantically swinging his automatic around behind us. The 12 gauge roared, and I saw a crow spin down. He fired again, and Art's gun blasted its third shell at the same time. Then it was all over.

"I don't know where they all came from," Art chuckled. "At first I just saw four birds, but when I stood up there were crows all around us."

"For a second I couldn't decide which target to shoot at," said Al. "There must have been half a dozen within 30 feet of me."

I was thrilled, until I glanced at Jack. He looked confused.

"There was too much brush," he said. "When I stood up I couldn't see over the blind. I couldn't find a hole to shoot through."

We fixed that by cutting the brush down far enough in front of Jack's position for him to point his gun straight out.

Minutes later a flock of a dozen crows appeared over a hill to our left. They were 100 yards away when Al's call convinced two of the birds that our decoys had a good thing going. They peeled out of the flock and zoomed down at us.

Jack jumped up and shot but didn't score. Al and I did. Two dead crows thumped the ground.

During the next 20 minutes Jack missed 10 straight shots. He didn't say much, but the corners of his mouth were drawn tight and I could read the disappointment in his eyes. I knew he was nervous because he was hunting with strangers, but that didn't explain all the misses.

"Jack," I said, "you might be leading these birds too much. When they're floating over the decoys they're not going as fast as ducks or clay targets. Cut your lead a bit and let's see what happens."

"Another thing," Art suggested. "You're jumping and snap-shooting. That's throwing you off. Try getting your gun half raised, then ease up slowly while you shoulder the stock. By the time you're standing you'll be ready to shoot."

A single crow glided in but spotted something and flared. The 20 gauge cracked and the crow fell away from drifting feathers.

"I got that one," Jack yelled. "He's mine. I hit him!"

"Sure he's yours," Al said. "Nobody else pulled a trigger. Load up, here come some more."

We had killed 23 crows when Jim rejoined us. He had one rabbit.

Jack was well into his second box of shells, now and a light drizzle was falling. The flight parade was still going strong, but many flocks were passing over the levee half a mile to our left.

"Til fix that," Art said. "I'll walk back to the car and drive it down to where those birds are crossing. Maybe I can flare them back this way."

The strategy worked, and so did Al's calling. At one point Jim said, "You got a couple coming from the north Al. I see more lower, and they're coming too. You've got some coming straight out front."

The drizzle had turned to rain by the time our score added up to 40. New flocks kept coming, and the shooting continued. But soon the rain became heavy. We were half soaked when Art said, "Let's wrap it up."

On the drive back to our motel room in Sikeston I asked Al if we'd had a typical Missouri winter crow hunt.

"About average," he said. "We didn't kill as many birds as we should have. Our blind was in a good spot, but it was too cramped for good gun swinging. That muddy ground didn't help any either. I'd say we had at least 250 crows in easy shotgun range."

I'd planned this crow shoot three months earlier. My friend Don Wooldrige of Missouri's Department of Conservation had written and told me about the hordes of migrating crows that winter in his state.

"Tremendous flocks build up along the Mississippi and Missouri rivers," he said in his letter. "They feed on waste grain and roost in islands of willow trees in the rivers. Come on down and I'll show you some top shotgunning."

Don and I had scheduled a hunt, but he'd had to cancel out at the last moment.

"But I was just talking with Art Province, one of our conservation agents in Charleston," he said to me over the phone. "He says there are a hundred-thousand crows in a roost near New Madrid. He's ready to shoot some of those birds anytime you are."

My wife arranged for Jack to miss a few days of school, and we left from home in Ludington, Michigan, on February 3. Art had reserved a motel room for us and he was knocking on our door before we had unpacked our bags. I asked Art if he would have any objections to Jack's joining the hunt. "Bring him along," he said.

"It's noon now," I told him. "We can be ready in an hour."

"There's no hurry," Art replied. "We don't hunt crows till late afternoon. I'll pick you up about three o'clock."

When Jack and I climbed into Art's car and met Al and Jim, I had plenty of questions to ask.

"How come you don't hunt crows until late afternoon?" I said. "In Michigan we get our best shooting over feeding grounds from dawn on. That's when the birds are hungry, and they decoy readily. With all the crows you have here that technique should be murder."

"It isn't," Al answered, "because there's too much food. Cornfields everywhere. There aren't any isolated feeding areas where flocks build up. The crows are scattered, and they don't start bunching until they head for roosts. Sure, there can be a hundred-thousand crows in one roost, but they fly in from different directions, like spokes on a wheel. If you don't rig out under one of those flyways you won't get any shooting."

"Don't expect to see a lot of crows at any one time," Art added. "They string out on the flyways for 30 miles or more. If you see a hundred in the air at once that's a lot. But as soon as those birds pass there'll be more coming. The parade goes on for hours. That's why the shooting can be fabulous if everything is in your favor."

"What Dad means," Jim said, "is that you never know how the birds will react from day to day. They often change flyways and leave you holding the bag. Some days they hedgehop, and other days they ride wind currents far above shotgun range. Some days they're in a decoying mood, and other days they aren't."

By the time we arrived at our shooting area I was convinced that winter crow hunting was just as much of a gamble as any other hunting. But when we drove down the levee I mentioned at the beginning of this story, my doubts about finding action vanished.

Jim didn't join us the next afternoon, but Tom Hess did. Tom is a 39-year-old farmer who has hunted since he was big enough to do so, and he thinks crow shooting is about as much fun as you can get out of any hunt. We didn't kill as many crows on our second as we did on our first, but I found the action more exciting. The weather was still cloudy, about 50°, but it wasn't raining when we rigged up near the edge of a thicket bordering soybean fields. We were about a mile from where we'd been the day before.

"We never hunt from the same blind two days in a row," Al said. "We worked those birds over pretty good yesterday and they'll remember that as a trouble spot. By the time we quit last night most of the flocks were drifting down over this area."

As it turned out, we were in the right spot, but the crows were flying high and few showed interest in our decoys. For every 50 birds that passed us out of range, one offered a shot. But those odds are good when there are thousands of crows around, and that's why the shooting was exciting.

That's the way it was now. All of the classic long shots were executed over and over. As the shots rang out, some of the birds just folded and plunged straight down. Others cartwheeled, and still others seemed to trip up against the gray sky and swirl into thickets behind us. There were gliders, birds killed in the air that slanted down on starched wings and bounced when they hit the ground.

Jack liked that shooting. He was getting wise to picking out a bird in the

distance, watching it come all the way in, then standing, swinging smoothly, and shooting. He scored on eight unassisted kills, and he kept his birds separate from ours. The highlight of the day was his fine shot on a single crow that crashed into the front of our blind. There wasn't a happier boy in the world when Art grinned at him and said, "Jack, you're a crow hunter now."

By the time it was dusk, I felt that I knew what goes into making a Missouri crow hunt successful. The most important factor, of course, is to hunt where the crows are. The Missouri Department of Conservation makes it easy to do that. It publishes a list of the major winter crow roosts. The list includes scores of good areas pinpointed by county, township, range, section, and numbers of crows using the roosts. Up-to-date lists are available from the Department of Conservation, Box 180, Jefferson City, Missouri 65101.

"The best bet for a nonresident," Art told me, "is to pick a county that has large roosts, then get in touch with the local conservation agent. We're in the field everyday, and we keep track of crow movements. We can tell hunters where the best general areas are, but they'll still have to scout for exact flyway routes. Permission to hunt is no problem. Farmers hate crows."

There is no closed season on crows in Missouri, but out-of-staters need a non-resident small-game license costing \$25.30. The best time for a hunt? Art

says November because that's when migrating birds first arrive, and they are not hunted much then.

"It doesn't make much difference, because we've got so many crows all winter," Tom said. "I'd say anytime from mid-November to mid-February."

All my partners agreed that technique can make or break a hunt.

"Blind location is all important," Al insists. "It has to be precise. For example, you can't get crows to fly down a fence row. They'll cut across it every time. So you have to pick a fence row that cuts right across a flyway route. They seldom decoy against stands of tall timber. I always find low cover for my blinds. Crows going to roost usually fly lower if they're heading into the wind. You'll get much better shooting if you have the wind at your back."

Tom's strong point is blind construction. He wouldn't think of starting a shoot unless his blind blends in perfectly with the landscape.

"It doesn't take much longer to build a good blind than a poor one," he says. "Crows are just too cautious to be fooled by halfway efforts."

Incidentally, the basic blind material we used is the best I've ever seen. It's army-surplus camouflage netting. You can buy it at military-surplus stores. It offers fair concealment by itself, and it's just about perfect when covered with dead grasses, weeds, and sticks.

My companions emphasized the im-

portance of having at least three dozen decoys. "There are so many crows here you've got to use a big decoy spread to attract their attention," says Tom. "Full-body papier-mâché decoys are light to carry, and I fill out the flock with a dozen or so silhouettes."

Perfect calling is important too. Al and Tom prefer hand callers because by using them they can vary the tone and loudness of their calls to suit any conditions.

What impressed me most about the calling was that Al and Tom did it almost continuously. If there was a crow in the sky they would start calling, and they never gave up on a bird until it became a distant black spot. Many times I watched crows that seemed to be uninterested suddenly wheel and rush for the decoys.

"You have to keep talking to them," Al said. "You gotta convince them they should join the crowd."

I've mentioned the guns we used. As for shot sizes, some of my partners used No. 6's and others No. 7½'s. I used everything from BB's to No. 9's since I took along odds and ends of reloads I'd been accumulating for several seasons.

Though I was hunting with experts, we took a licking on the third and last day of our hunt. The sky had cleared, and warm sunshine flooded the fields. We tried a new area and guessed where the flyway would be. We guessed wrong by about a mile. It was frustrating to watch thousands of crows fly lazily

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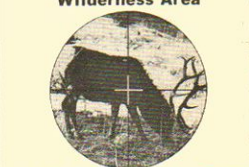
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across a field south of us. We got enough shooting to make it an interesting day, but the action couldn't compare to that of the two previous days.

I left Missouri with two lasting impressions. One is that I still find it hard to believe that during three days of hunting within a few miles of several towns we didn't see another hunter or hear a single shot fired outside of our group.

"Most local hunters wouldn't think of slogging across these wet fields to go crow hunting," Al told me. "They wait for drier and warmer weather. Besides, this is great goose and dove-hunting country. By the time our hunters wrap up a fall's shooting at gamebirds, they're not much interested in crows."

My other lasting impression is one of satisfaction from watching Jack absorb a tremendous amount of shotgunning know-how. With today's short gamebird seasons and shooting restrictions, it's hard for a boy to do enough gunning to make him a good wingshot. Jack summed the experience up well while we were driving home.

"Crows fly a lot sloppier than ducks," he said. "I couldn't figure out where to shoot till I'd shot at about 50 of them. But it didn't bother me, because I knew there were more coming all the time. By the end I was getting pretty good. Boy, that's fun." THE END

ALASKA'S AGONY

(continued from page 35)

the murre kill resulted from natural causes, probably starvation aggravated by a severe storm. No evidence of oil pollution was found on the dead birds.

But that explanation could not account for the dead sea otters or the sick seals. And many people, remembering the oil sheens, do not believe that the true cause had been ferreted out.

No one has summed up the problems that go with Alaska's oil riches better than Tom Brown, a writer on the Anchorage Daily News. Brown began an award-winning series of articles in that paper with the statement, "On the one hand Alaska possesses the richest pool of oil ever found in North America, and on the other hand it has the world's most magnificent wilderness. To avoid wrecking the scenic beauty of our state, to err on the side of conservation—that is the course Alaskans must chart."

To date, however, there is not much evidence that Alaska's political leaders intend to follow that course. And although most of the oil companies involved in the North Slope rush are trying to follow sound conservation practices, by no means have all of the problems been eliminated.

In a period of a few weeks last summer, for example, one major oil company paid a fine of \$400 for damaging a spawning stream by crossing it with a heavy tracked vehicle, and an Anchorage construction firm was fined \$1,000 for dumping raw sewage from a 230-man camp into the Kuparuk River.

There was jubilation in conservation circles last spring when a U.S. court in San Francisco ruled that the oil-rich land under Tutstumena Lake (30 miles long and 10 wide) in the Kenai National Moose Range belonged to the United States. Alaska, claiming title, had already issued oil leases on some of that submerged land.

"The Kenai moose have won out over oil exploration," said the Wildlife Management Institute.

But welcome as the court ruling was, the fact that the state of Alaska had fought on the side of oil interests and against the moose was of far greater significance. I should add that the Fish and Game Department had no part in the suit.

All the evidence, added up, leaves little room for question. Alaska is not doing the job of wildlife protection that needs to be done.

Who or what is to blame? How do dishonest guides and hunters get away with illegal hunting for conspicuous trophy animals like polar bears? What makes it possible for violators to smuggle more than 100 brown-bear and grizzly pelts, unsealed and illegal, out of Alaska in one 18-month period? Why do airborne guides dare to haze rams openly to the guns of their clients? Why are safeguards against catastrophic oil spills not more rigidly enforced?

The fault does not lie with the Fish and Game Department. With few exceptions, the men who make up that department are able, dedicated, and hard working.

"They're so absorbed in their duties that you'd have to hold their heads under water for 10 minutes before they'd realize they were wet," an Alaskan outdoor writer told me.

There are two basic reasons for what is happening: 1) the size of the state coupled with a shorthanded game department, and 2) politics.

Few out-of-staters comprehend Alaska's enormous area and the distances involved in getting from place to place. Lay a map of the state on a map of the Lower 48 drawn to the same scale, and Alaska will reach from Georgia to the California coast and from the Canadian border to the Rio Grande. The state's total area is about 590,000 square miles.

The situation is summed up accurately by Dr. Robert Weeden, a game biologist who, because of a "gag rule" in the Fish and Game Department, quit his job there in 1969 to represent the Alaska Conservation Society, the Wilderness Society, and the Sierra Club.

"The department has never had enough men and money to do the job," Weeden says. "The best it could hope for was to cope with the tip of the iceberg that showed above the water. We got by when three-fourths of the state was economically asleep, but now oil money has opened Pandora's box and we are caroming from crisis to crisis with events damn near out of control."

To enforce the game and fish laws, including commercial-fishing regulations, in a vast and mostly inacces-

sible land (no town west of the Kenai Peninsula can be reached by road, and something like three-fourths of the state is still roadless), the game department has a staff of 44 men. Supervision accounts for seven of that number, leaving 37 to patrol regularly in the field. It is routine for an Alaskan protection officer to have a beat bigger than the states of Connecticut and Massachusetts combined.

Says Gene Kvalvick, an Anchorage guide who has complained bitterly to OUTDOOR LIFE about Alaska's failure to give adequate protection to its wildlife:

"Let me give you a picture of the way too many Alaskan snowmobile hunters operate. On a Friday night, after hearing reports of a caribou migration near the Denali Highway, two of them load their machines onto a truck, leave Anchorage at midnight, and arrive at their destination for breakfast.

"As daylight comes the road is crowded with hunter traffic. Then the caribou are seen, perhaps 1,000 of them in bunches of 10 to 60, strung out for miles on the snow-covered hills. Our pair frantically unload their machines and roar off across the lakes and ridges in pursuit. Within minutes they are hot after a band of 50 animals. When they get within 50 yards they stop the snowmobiles and start shooting.

"As the caribou disappear over a ridge one man yells, 'Don't shoot any more. I got four.' His partner calls back, 'I got five.' There is a three-caribou limit, and only one thing to do. Three of the nine carcasses are covered with snow and left where they lie. The six others are taken back to the truck. Of those animals that ran over the ridge, nobody knows how many are wounded, and nobody cares.

"Why do such disgraceful things happen? Why doesn't a game warden nab such violators? For a couple of good reasons. A warden has something like 30,000 square miles to protect. And along an 80-mile stretch of this one highway there may be nearly 100 snow machines carrying hunters."

A ranking game official in Juneau told me: "The size of Alaska is far from our only problem, but it's a big one. It costs us far more to operate than it does most other states. Our annual budget is relatively big, but air charter eats into it in a hurry.

"We are also spread very thin when it comes to personnel. One game biologist is responsible for all programs on the Alaska Peninsula, including the Aleutians. Another handles all caribou work for the entire state, still another has brown and grizzly bears, and a third does all the polar-bear research that gets done.

"Our protection officers are spread as thin or thinner. There are only nine in the northern two-thirds of the state. Despite the people pouring onto the North Slope and the illegal hunting that has cut a wide swath in the wolf and grizzly populations, no protection