

Outdoor Life

FEBRUARY

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A Preview Of
1951
Boats and Motors



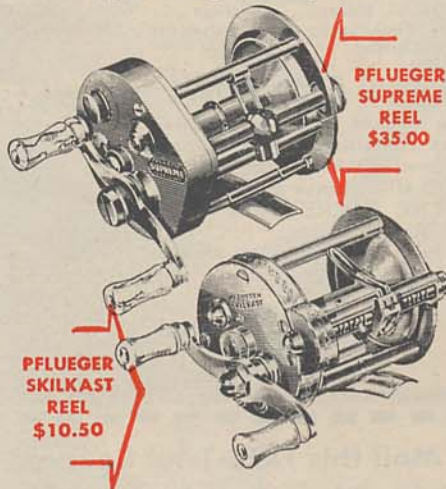
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IN THIS ISSUE OF

Outdoor Life

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MACHINE-AGE GEESE



Early morning found me half concealed in a Wisconsin cornfield, hoping the birds would see our decoys and decide to join them

It was a surprise visit they paid us, but we didn't ask why—until they had left!

by

ROB F. SANDERSON

Hardly more than feathered shadows winging across the Wisconsin dawn, the great birds approached as softly as bats in the evening. They passed overhead too high for shooting, but we hoped they'd circle back at a lower altitude. When it was

clear that the flock did not intend to turn, Tom uttered a low note through the call.

As if in immediate response the great flapping wedge swerved, curved back downwind, then banked gently around for a second pass over the decoys. As the eleven honkers flapped toward us they dropped lower and my pulse spurted when I saw they would be barely but definitely within range of our No. 2 heavy loads. For this moment we had waited flat on our bellies for hours, stiffened by the cold and the hard ground.

Nearing us now, the swishing wings whispered through the frosty air. I dared not move my head too much while

trying, in the poor light, to choose the precise moment for shooting. I tensed, ready to jump up. At last the right moment ticked and, flinging off my protective cover of cornstalks, I was immediately at a crouch.

Twelve gauge auto at my shoulder, the first shot roared across the field. It missed—my lead was too short. It was a mistake that's easy to make, since a large bird appears to be flying slower than a small bird traveling at equal speed. As I jumped to my feet and selected a second bird, I heard Tom fire.

The goose I'd picked faltered but flew on when I pulled the trigger. I fired again—my last shot, held with deliberate accuracy. This time the big

bird swooshed slantwise to the earth. It was above average size, and of the right plumpness for roasting. Tom's bird had staggered heavily in the air but managed to stay air-borne, so I held mine up by one wing for him to see. Then I ran my fingers through the thick breast feathers and felt the heavy fuselage. It was a honker trophy like this that I had in mind when we first heard, four days before, that the big geese had arrived.

I had gone to one of the local sporting-goods stores for a can of gun oil, and stopped at the gunrack to question the unofficial Board of Directors who conveyed there each afternoon. Was it true that one goose had been shot yesterday on Mud Lake, and two on Arlington Prairie? Yes, it was, and more had been shot this morning—the score hadn't come in yet but would be ready by 6 o'clock. The geese, they informed me, had arrived suddenly, like snowflakes in a blizzard, and were rafting on Lake Wisconsin during the daytime after making the cornfield circuit.

Their arrival caught local gunners unprepared. For many seasons past the only geese taken in our area were a few stragglers from the southbound flocks of honkers that flew over Wisconsin nonstop in the dead of night, unseen but squonking loudly. All we were accustomed to get out of this annual migration was a spell of dirty weather, so goose hunting had not rated as a sport with us since before the days of the migratory-bird stamp.

But now, overnight, all the unsold goose decoys (which ordinarily survived for the January inventory) were snapped up, along with all the No. 2 shot in town, and the goose campaign was on.

Tom and I had never done any local goose chasing, but we were willing to test the theories currently held by the best barber-shop authority. We mobilized our equipment at 4:30 a.m. and piled into the car. As we left it for a half-mile hike to a river-bottom cornfield we were in the dark in more ways than one. But like scores of our fellow hunters who had never before shot geese over decoys, we were eager for the classrooms of experience.

The Honkers Came Over

We set up our six goose decoys downwind among the corn, after driving a short length of iron rod into the hard ground to make holes for their leg posts amid the bent-over cornstalks.

Soon, from the weedy fence row we'd chosen for our cover, we heard the first honkers. The pinkening sky filled with long wedges of geese. Long, black-dotted V-formations passed lazily across the distant skies while we reverently hoped that one flock would choose our field for a breakfast snack. After the deep shadows on the earth had thinned, a flock spotted our decoy group, flew high over us, then like a paper airplane turned in a wide descending spiral and headed back toward us from downwind.

Every pair of eyes in that formation was microscoping the field suspiciously. As they came almost within gun range a few birds at the sides broke ranks.

The entire flock then split into two groups and passed to either side, beyond shooting distance. Disappointment welled over us and then receded as the birds turned full circle and again approached the decoys.

Every muscle tensed, Tom and I fingered the safeties on our shotguns to "fire" position and crooked our trigger fingers. The birds, lower than before, were descending slightly. Just when chances were passing into surety, a couple of jittery geese broke ranks, and the whole flock veered to one side.

Another Flock Teased Us

We waited hopefully for the birds to swing back, but we hoped in vain. Half an hour later another flock teased and disappointed us in the same manner, and they were the last birds to decoy that morning. Cornfield shooting ordinarily being finished before nine, we were back in town by then.

We entered the same cornfield before dawn the next day with fresh resolve. Having concluded that geese are wary of any cover with conspicuous hunter-concealment possibilities, we left our fence row in favor of a low sag in the center of the field and gathered armfuls of dry cornstalks to cover our backs.

Another thing we'd noticed was that

the nervous geese broke ranks from the approach pattern while still downwind from the decoys. So we now set the decoys upwind from our blinds, in hope of getting overhead shots even if the approaching flocks did flare away short of the decoys. Then we wriggled under our respective piles of cornstalks.

In the silence of the dawn the waited minutes dripped by slowly, like drops of tap water when you watch them, wondering impatiently how they can hang so long. But every minute was a new gambling chip to bet on our hunting odds that morning, and we lay motionless and silent, with the patience of a set trap. The growing light seemed somehow to make the chill air warmer, although in fact it felt just as cold. At last through the graying sky echoed the faint but approaching clarions of geese. In the thin, flat light our decoys were soon visible and before long they attracted a flock of at least fifty birds.

Unusually high at first, they flew past with deliberate caution, then circled clockwise for an upwind approach to the decoys. I held my breath with the excitement of waiting, knowing too well that if one or two birds got cold feet the entire flock might take alarm and veer away while yet beyond range.

Regardless of the outcome, it was

(continued on page 76)



Two loads of No. 2's and down it came! I held the big bird up for Tom to admire

MACHINE-AGE GEESE

(continued from page 39)

quite a show. The birds passed directly overhead, too high for shooting. I relaxed as the big wings swished through the October dawn and turned for another look at the decoys.

On the second circle the geese seemed to have gained confidence and turned shorter for their final run over the target. But they looked pretty high even yet. Now that they were interested, I figured they were good for another, lower circle. I planned to hold fire if Tom did, and since he apparently felt the same way we let them pass.

The geese were over the far edge of the cornfield, going downwind for another circle, when our hopes were exploded by an ack-ack of unexpected shots; and as we stared dejectedly one lone goose tumbled from the sky.

While the rest of the birds departed under climb power, Tom and I purpled the air with expletives. The other hunting party had slipped into the neighborhood unseen while we were flat on our bellies under the cornstalks. This experience ended the day on a sour note, but we felt our strategy was sound.

As we assembled our decoys and left the cornfield I could not help comparing it with those I remembered from pre-war days. Then the corn had all been cut and piled into neat little wigwams, which would be hauled away so the ears of corn could be sorted and the stalks used for litter or piled against a loosely boarded building to insulate it from the wintry drafts. In contrast, this machine-harvested field was a tangle of frowzy cornstalks.

During the cold hours we had waited on our bellies those two mornings, our ears had not been idle. We listened carefully to all honks and other notes uttered by the geese, and each night we practiced them. The third morning we felt confident enough to put our goose call into action without unwittingly emitting the "alarm"—as I'd done for several mornings, until some helpful soul set me straight, when I first tried out a duck call.

We used the goose call only to attract the attention of passing birds to the decoys or to try to call a flock back after they had decided to depart. Apparently they could tell whether a call was uttered from the ground or in flight, and ours seemed to carry far.

Two Squonks Brought 'em In

Without such help we probably wouldn't have decoyed any honkers that morning. Our first experiment was trying to turn flocks at a considerable distance. Two or three squonks on the call seemed enough to bring them in, but only if they were so disposed. The first two flocks ignored us. The third, consisting of eleven birds, swerved at the call, spotted the decoys, and began the characteristic approach pattern.

This was the flock that gave Tom and me our first actual taste of goose shooting. And once we'd held one of those majestic trophies, raised high enough so that the dangling wing would not

touch the ground, we were converts for life. Our trigger arms had been vaccinated by a goose's bill!

We crawled back under the cornstalks for the next volley, but it failed to materialize. About 8 o'clock we emerged to wave our arms, jump up and down, and otherwise steady our chattering teeth. It proved a most inopportune time to show ourselves, for our indiscreet action warned off the only flock to show itself in more than half an hour. Even so, we went home to breakfast mighty happy with one genuine wild goose to our credit.

Although cloudy weather had been forecast, the next morning's sun rose into a blank sky. What few flocks were in the air appeared as long trailing lines of distant specks. We had been on our bellies for more than an hour, and I was thinking the thought I always think at such times—namely, what dopes we were not to have dug a blind where we could sit comfortably and scan the sky without getting a stiff neck.

Tom was trying the call now and then just for luck. Suddenly it acquired an enthusiastic, beguiling tone, and right away I knew he had sighted feathers.

I glanced up as much as possible without moving my head, and saw nothing. The single goose was coming in downwind in an unconventional approach, and Tom had spied it only because he happened to be lying on his back for a change. The stray came right over us, made a close turn into the wind, and sailed past us again not more than twenty feet in the air. Just as it braked its wings to settle among the decoys, Tom slammed home a rear quartering shot and the big bird fell.

Our decoys were arranged in two groups, according to size, and it was evident that the lone goose had been heading straight for the larger ones. As Tom said later, "There was no doubt in its mind which birds were its pals."

We plan to enlarge our decoy ranks to nine birds next season, and the new recruits will all be large.

Because we started late in the season and because of our inexperience, we had barely achieved routine effectiveness when the shooting slowed down. The weather turned cooler, and the honkers cleared out for Illinois just ahead of a really cold spell.

Thinking things over after they left, we began to wonder why the geese had bothered to stop off in southern Wisconsin. Some local gunners explained it on the basis of very mild fall weather, but others recalled equally mild seasons that had produced no geese. Some thought the climate was changing; others said that geese just naturally change their stop-overs every so often,

They Like Machine-picked Corn

The true answer, I believe, came the day before we quit hunting for the departing birds. As we were driving down a lane out to the main road on our way home we met a farmer on a tractor, and paused for pleasantries.

"Do you think the honkers will be back next year?" I asked.

"Sure," the farmer said, throttling the engine to run quieter. "You've seen these newfangle mechanical corn pickers hereabouts? Well, everybody's bought one the last year or two—at the price of labor a body can't afford to have his corn picked by hand—and those machines spill kernels all over the ground as they go along. The way I figure it, the geese are wise to this. They'll be back!"

On the hunch that he is right, Tom and I are practicing our goose calls at odd times, so we can improve our cornfield conversation. Next season we hope to talk in more specimens of science's latest invention for hunters—the machine-age goose!

THE END



Tom with the stray that spotted our high-standing stool and responded to his call