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CHAPTER FIVE

Various Vermin

The fox is the main threat to game on any type of shoot, and birds of prey can be a problem but are totally protected. But there are other creatures which can be a problem and these need to be controlled where this is allowed.

Carrion crow

The first predator which would come into this category is the carrion crow, sometimes called the corbie or hoodie. One of the most intelligent birds on the planet, the carrion crow is the ultimate survivor and any unkept part of the countryside can be recognised immediately by the obvious 'hoodie' nests adorning, it would seem, every second or third tree. Any bird unfortunate enough to select such an area to nest would be doomed to failure, for if the carrion crow did not find the nest itself, he would almost certainly steal the chicks after they were hatched. He is endowed with excellent eyesight and any attempt to ambush him with a gun can be very difficult unless great care is taken to attain complete concealment.

Winged vermin day

On arriving on an estate to take up the position of gamekeeper, the reader should assess the population of carrion crows. If there are many present, a good idea is to invite potential beaters to a winged vermin day. Baits such as hare and rabbit carcasses, road casualty pheasant etc, should be saved to provide an attraction to corvids. Hides should be built and decoy eagle owls placed nearby. The dummy eagle owls are normally placed on a post overlooking the bait and, often in conjunction with decoy crows and magpies, are an irresistible draw for members of the corvid family.

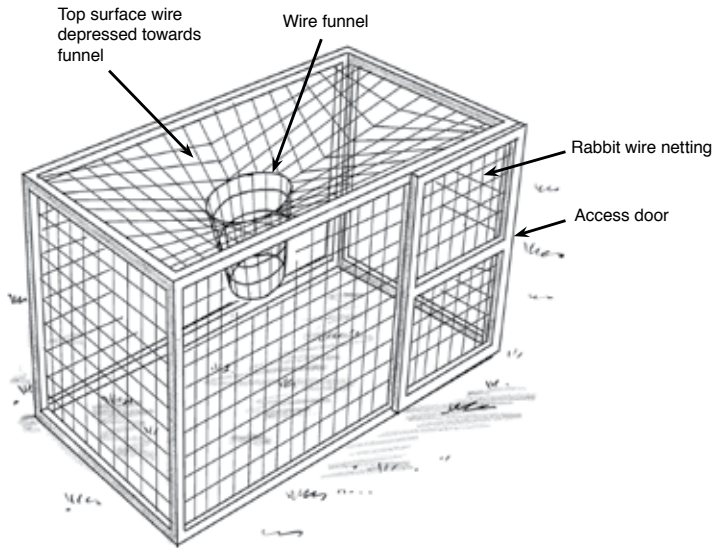
Guns can be used singly or in pairs and should wear full camouflage, including face masks and gloves. Semi-automatic camouflaged guns are the ideal weapon for this purpose and if several different decoy sites are used, a good bag of crows can be attained.

As nightfall draws nearer, the guns can be moved to the woods where previous reconnaissance has shown that crows choose to roost. This can be good sport and the end result will be a reduction in your crow population and an opportunity for you to make contact with people who might help you in the future.

Carrion crow traps

Large cages with funnel-type entrances in the roof can catch carrion crows all the year round, especially if decoy birds, ie. other carrion crows are kept in them. The decoy birds must be provided with shelter, roosting, food and clean water, so if you cannot make a commitment to the decoy's welfare, do not undertake this practice. Baits should be placed below the funnel: rabbits, hares, pheasants, pigeons eggs or any other attractive food you can think of. The construction of these traps will be described in a subsequent chapter and they are well worth the expense and effort. They mop up birds all the year round, especially in hard weather.

As spring comes round and the weather becomes warmer, the carrion crows pair up and start to build nests. This is a remarkably swift operation and it feels as though nests appear overnight. Isolated hardwood trees are a favourite site, although carrion crows will nest in woods or in thorn trees close to the ground on a hill. There are even recorded instances of them nesting on the ground or on the top of a dry stone dyke. When the territory becomes apparent, the Larsen trap becomes



The crow cage trap

most effective. A trap set near a nest site will almost always catch the pair, often within hours of being set. The Larsen trap is basically a cage with three compartments, one for the decoy, two to catch the territorial pair. I will describe their construction and deployment in following chapters.

The elusive ones

The previous measures should have reduced your population of corbies considerably, but there will be individuals and pairs who decline to play ball and have to be dealt with by other means. Two, three or even more guns can approach a difficult nest at dusk, slowly converging until there is no safe exit route for the hen hoodie. If she flushes, she should be dealt with: the semi-auto is useful should a difficult shot be provided. The nest can be approached at certain stages of incubation and the hen will not flush despite shots fired past the nest, shouts or hands clapped. In such circumstances, if you are sure that the bird occupies the nest, the only alternative is to shoot the centre of the nest using heavy shot. You may kill the bird on the nest or force her to flush. However, if she is not at home she will nest again and perhaps, as she will be more wary the second time, you may not find her so easily again.

The attention that you have given to your crow population will have made them more wary and sophisticated, therefore it may well be that the few survivors can only be accounted for by decoying birds to baits as described earlier and hiding 50–100 yards away using a .22 rim-fire or centre-fire rifle to account for them.

A scarcity of carrion crows is a prerequisite for a wild partridge, pheasant or grouse shoot, the keeper spending more time on this task than perhaps a pheasant keeper on a reared bird shoot. That said, every keeper should control carrion crows to the best of his ability and resources, as the benefits accrued to the bird population by that practice cannot be overestimated and this is one of the most compelling arguments for predator control.

Times past

Employers should realise that it is much more difficult for the modern keeper to control crows than it was in years gone by. In times past, eggs dosed with strychnine or some other freely-available poison could be placed over the full extent of the shoot, wiping out the crow population in a short time. A difficult nest could be dealt with by climbing to the nest, breaking an egg and administering poison. The hen bird on returning to the nest could not resist the yolk, even though it was one of her own.

Another ploy was to place ‘Cymag’ (cyanide powder) in the bottom of the nest below the eggs with the addition of a little water. The hen, on returning sat on the eggs, inhaled the gas and succumbed in a very short time.

Trapping was also easier and effective, a favourite being the gin trap set on a purpose-built peninsular jutting out into a pond or a lake. A bait was set at the end of the peninsular so that any bird or animal trying to approach the bait would have to be caught. An added refinement to this method was a weight attached to the trap chain, the weight placed in such a way that the struggles of the victim caused it to fall into the water taking corbie, fox or other predator to a watery grave.

One last point to remember: never underestimate this bird. If you account for the hen at a nest, be aware that the cock bird will bring another hen to incubate the eggs so try to get him at all costs.

Set out the dead hen as a decoy near the nest then shoot the cock as he approaches to investigate. A hide, and camouflage clothing, are