

# RISK THEIR LIVES to BREAK UP the ILLEGAL DUCK HUNTING RACKET



By C. S. van Dresser

**I**N Uncle Sam's Bureau of Biological Survey an attempt is being made to retire field men of the Game Management Division engaged in law enforcement when they reach the age of 62, because of the hazards of the work. If a Federal game agent has served many years rounding up illicit market duck hunters and other game law violators, the chances are that, if he hasn't been killed, he has been shot at and beaten up enough times to crack his nerve and so sap his physical strength that he no longer is able to meet the strenuous requirements of his job.

Consider Agents Roahen and Charlton. A few winters ago these two Federal men were patrolling the Sawgamon river bottoms in Illinois. They suspected that several commercial duck shooters were plying their trade in that desolate swamp region. As they made their slow trek through the thickets, they heard several shots nearby, and proceeded in the direction of the firing. Soon they saw a hunting coat hung on a bush. As they searched it in an effort to discover the identity of the owner, they heard a slight noise behind them. Wheeling sharply the game agents saw two men with leveled shotguns.

"Take your hands off that coat and get to hell out of here if you want to live!" was the command.

The Federal men dropped the garment and started backing slowly away, their hands in the air. When they were but 25 yards from the criminals they jumped behind trees and demanded that the men submit to arrest. Their answer was a blast of gun fire which the officers attempted to return.

Evidently the lawbreakers were "hunting for game wardens," a not unknown practice of such hard bitten characters, for they were using buckshot on the officers, whose ammunition consisted of the standard number 4 duck shot. The hunters made their getaway, apparently unhurt, after wounding the two officers seriously. Roahen and Charlton were shot through the face, chest and lower body, the heavy buckshot having penetrated their hunting togs, while their lighter bird shot was incapable of inflicting any wound through the thick clothing of the would-be killers.

Today, Roahen is still with the Biological Survey, permanently crippled. Charleton had to be retired from active service. The gunmen were never captured.

Although affrays such as this are not everyday experiences with the field men, those officers constantly run dangers from out and out murderers, bank robbers, kidnapers and other

criminals. For this reason: Today the Federal Game Management men usually go about their duties in uniforms which resemble those of border patrolmen and state police. To a fugitive from justice, a uniform is a uniform, and he is just as likely as not to shoot at sight of an officer.

**I**NDICATIVE of the hazards run by game law enforcement officers is the case of a warden in the state of Washington. On his regular tour of duty he ran across a youth who apparently was shooting Chinese pheasants out of season.

The officer merely walked across the field toward the youth, intending to question him. When he was within a few yards of the suspect, the young man raised his double-barreled shotgun and fired without warning. He practically blew the officer's head off, killing him instantly.

Later the murderer was apprehended and sentenced to prison.

In various parts of the country, the market duck hunters flourish. The thousands of lagoons and stream-mouths of Chesapeake Bay and the eastern Maryland shore are ideal for them for it is difficult for game agents to locate them. In this thinly populated region, ducks have been killed in great numbers by guns of tremendous size and by means of so-called "armadas," or batteries of from 5 to 30 guns, going off simultaneously. This practice has been fairly well wiped out, but a description of the operations is interesting.

The huge guns, veritable cannons from 8 to 12 feet in length and capable of firing an immense quantity of shot, are mounted on the prows of small boats. At dusk, when the ducks return from open water to some sheltered lagoon, the boat is cautiously poled toward the flock, and when within range, the giant shotgun is fired. So unwieldy are these mammoth firearms, that it is necessary to aim the boat, not the gun. The recoil will knock the craft back as much as 10 feet; one shot will net from 50 to 150 ducks.

Usually the ducks are sold to meat markets in Baltimore. Here is an example of how a ring of illegal wild duck marketers, which operated in eastern Maryland, was broken up:

An agent of the Biological Survey was suspicious of a certain butcher shop in Baltimore. He gained the confidence of the proprietor and purchased a few canvasback ducks. He later made arrangements for a number of ducks and quail to be delivered to Washington, D. C., tipping off Survey headquarters when a truck, carrying the



Wildfowl racketeers use oversized guns, such as this, mounted on prows of boats. One shot may kill as many as 150 ducks.

contraband, was to arrive. The vehicle was intercepted upon entering the nation's capital and the driver arrested. It developed that the chauffeur was ignorant of the nature of the load he was carrying, and therefore was not charged for violation of the game laws. The market owner, on the other hand, was palpably guilty, and sought to cover up his source of supply by giving as the man who did the illegal shooting, the name of a person who had been dead for two years. The case is not closed yet, for the Biological Survey hopes to learn during the current duck season the true identity of the hunter who supplied the Baltimore market.

One step, taken last year, will do much to protect the game and song birds whose habitat is Texas, New Mexico, Arizona, and southern California, according to the Biological Survey. That step was the signing of a treaty in June of 1936 between Mexico and the United States to stop the shipment of live birds

Photos from U. S. Biological Survey  
The illegal duck hunter would like very much to train his big guns on a flock of wildfowl such as this, for 40 or 50 of these blue-winged teal would net a nice bit of money when sold to a crooked meat dealer.

from Mexico into the United States.

Before the signing of the treaty, it was possible to trap quail in Mexico and transport them to the United States. Unsportsmanlike hunters and commercial shooters trapped game birds by the thousands in the United States. If they were not actually caught in the act, there was almost no possibility of arrest and conviction, for if a game warden came upon a truck load of quail, the owner simply stated that he trapped them in Mexico, and what was the officer going to do about it?

**T**ODAY, every consignment of trapped quail must bear a permit from the Mexican and American governments—the one from Mexico to allow the quail to leave that country, and the one from Washington to permit them to cross the International Line. Thus if a person is caught with a flock of wild quail in cages and no permits, he goes to jail and is fined. Trapping of game birds is, of course, prohibited in the United States.

The Biological Survey field men cooperate with state game and fish commissions in arresting breakers of state game laws. The state officers, in turn, frequently aid the Survey men in arresting and convicting a commercial migratory waterfowl hunter.

The following is a splendid example of the correlation of three law enforcement agencies:

On one of the main highways in the Upper Peninsula of Michigan a Biological Survey man was walking to pay a friendly visit to the nearest state police station. Suddenly a coupe of popular make appeared. For some reason the Survey man was suspicious of that car. He stopped the car and became still more suspicious. He did not have the authority to search the car, so he had to let the driver and his companion proceed. The Federal man then hurried to the police station and told his officer friend of his ideas. Immediately the two jumped into a state patrol car. Within a few miles they overtook the auto which was going over the speed limit. Now the state police had the authority to stop the vehicle. Upon search, seven deer were found in the rumble seat. The two prisoners were thereupon turned over to the Michigan game authorities, who proceeded to prosecute.