

CADS Submission in response to GMA's consideration of a 2019 duck shooting season

1. The game duck population is in serious long-term decline. To allow this to continue is not consistent with the "sustainability" mandate of the GMA.

- a) In the 1980s when our campaign started to end the violence and cruelty of duck shooting, there were some 100,000 duck shooters out on Victoria's wetlands and a lot more birds in those days.
- b) Back then, the large numbers of waterbirds were a key feature of Victoria's wetlands, earning them international status as Ramsar wetlands.
- c) We have witnessed the tragic decline in the abundance of waterbirds over more than four decades. There have been droughts and rains but the overall trend is down. The EAAWS 2018 Summary Report uses statistical analysis to prove there has been a long-term decline for 6 of the 8 game duck species. GMA has been asleep at the wheel while this is happening.
- d) The 2018 duck shooting season was very quiet. There were often more duck rescuers on the wetlands than duck shooters.
- e) GMA was found by an independent review (Pegasus Economics) to have failed in law enforcement. The shocking decline in waterbird abundance shows GMA has also failed in its duty of promoting sustainability.

2. Native waterbirds are in historically dire circumstances. Environmental considerations dictate that the 2019 duck shooting season must be cancelled.

- a) The team working on EAAWS 2018 were shocked to see how dry the land was and how sparse the waterbirds had become. EAAWS 2018 pointed out that this has been a record year for high temperatures and a near-record for dryness. This historically severe drought (possibly the worst on record) has received widespread media coverage. With a hot, dry summer predicted, the situation will be much worse by autumn when another shooting season is scheduled to take place. Many remaining wetlands will dry out. Also, bushfires are predicted to be bad this summer.
- b) Heavy rains are predicted for Victoria this week. Last year, GMA and the shooter groups took comfort in one heavy rain event (with flooding) in early December and used this to justify a full duck shooting season in 2018. But the warmer than usual year soon took care of that deluge. Evaporation was high and a devastating drought set in. One heavy rain event does not solve a severe drought. The Bureau of Meteorology's Summer Outlook predicts hotter and drier than usual weather.

c) We have been working with a skilled bird counter who has visited Victorian wetlands in recent days. The following wetlands are reported to be dry already:

- Top Marsh
- Middle Marsh
- Bottom Marsh
- Lake Bael Bael
- Hird Swamp
- Johnsons Swamp
- McDonalds Swamp
- Lookout Lake & Sandhill Lake (on Quambatook Rd)
- Lake Boort
- Lake Lyndger
- Woolshed Swamp
- Lake Yando
- Box Flat

d) Our bird counter has filed detailed reports (on Birdlife Australia's website). Between 4 and 8 December 2018, there were a range of species observed, but relatively few game ducks, and no breeding of any birds - at the following wetlands:

- Lake Murphy
- Lake Cullen
- Lake Elizabeth
- Lake Lonsdale
- Lake Colac

e) A spreadsheet is attached, summarising the observations.

- At Lake Lonsdale there were 400 Freckled Ducks present and very few game species.
- At Lake Colac, there were 11 endangered Freckled duck, 16 endangered Blue-billed duck and 6 Curlew sandpipers which GMA states to be "critically endangered".

f) If a duck shooting season is permitted, these few thousand game birds will be easy targets, for they have few wetland options elsewhere. This is particularly repugnant, just like 'canned hunting' which has been widely condemned by the community.

3. There is no point in "modifying" the next season. Adjusting bag limits makes little difference. The 2019 season must be cancelled.

a) Even the FGA acknowledges that reducing the bag limits makes little difference.

b) Looking back over the past 10 years (p35 of GMA's 'Considerations' document) there is a death toll above 200,000 and usually much higher, whatever the restrictions imposed. This doesn't

even take account of wounding, abandoned birds, those that are illegally shot and dumped, etc. Compare this death toll with the total count from EAAWS this year – just over 100,000 game birds sighted after all those kilometres of aerial surveys and careful counting. Another shooting season in 2019 would destroy multiple times (3, 4 or even 5 times) that carefully surveyed number of game ducks. You cannot pretend to care about sustainability and sanction a season in these dire circumstances.

4. The 2019 duck shooting season must be cancelled to protect the sustainability of threatened species.

- a) Birds are classified as threatened because their numbers are persistently low. Now their numbers are likely to be even lower, due to the drought.
- b) For example, the EAAWS 2018 observed only 7 Freckled Duck across eastern Australia. This survey does not provide a total count but it does track CHANGES in bird populations. This was a very low count.
- c) Every duck shooting season, threatened species are shot. It is disappointing that GMA does not try to measure how widespread this problem is. CADS' team of volunteer duck rescuers bring in the wounded and dead from all species, including threatened species, so we provide some indication of the extent of the problem. But this is probably just the tip of the iceberg because we cannot be everywhere.
- d) This risk of shooting protected and threatened species could be reduced by requiring shooters to pass a WIT test each year, along with an accuracy test. However, as GMA refuses to implement these sensible steps, it is essential to cancel the season to give the threatened species a chance to survive this drought.

5. Because it is impossible to regulate duck shooting, the 2019 season must be cancelled.

- a) GMA claims to regulate for “sustainable” and “humane” hunting (p3 of the ‘Consideration’ document). We believe this claim is false. A 2019 duck shooting season would be both unsustainable and inhumane.
- b) There will never be enough compliance officials to check every shooter, and there is evidence to suggest that many shooters will break the law if they think they won’t get caught. The recent review by Pegasus Economics found that GMA has failed in compliance and enforcement and is too comfortable with shooters. It has a serious conflict of interest.
- c) GMA has a pathetic track record in catching illegal shooters and exposing their offences. GMA refuses to prosecute shooters for cruelty offences. Rescuers regularly witness shooters treating wounded waterbirds in a very cruel manner, including stuffing them into bags while still alive; twirling them with one hand which is a terrible, ineffective way to try and kill them; or simply leaving crippled birds to flutter, limp, drown or slowly

starve.

- d) GMA's official report on the 2018 season acknowledged that one shooter in its telephone survey claimed to have shot two Australasian (blue-winged) Shovelers. There was no mention of any sanctions against the shooter.
- e) In parliament the Minister said that she had no reports of hunters shooting early, but 20 hunters were found to be in breach of regulations. She outlined the actions taken:

“Two hunters will receive infringement notices for failing to make reasonable attempts to retrieve a downed bird, and a further three hunters received a written warning for failing to comply. Two people will be prosecuted for taking protected wildlife; the firearms of one of those hunters were seized. A group of three hunters will be prosecuted for hunting in a closed area on Sunday 18 March, and all three had their firearms seized.

There were some other hunting offences which we would describe as, relative to the others, minor offences: one of hunting from a moving boat, one of somebody not having their game licence, one of possession of toxic shot on a state game reserve, one instance of failing to retain a fully feathered wing and one of hunting with toxic shot. There were some written warnings for some other matters: failing to kill on recovery, possession of toxic shot, hunting from a moving boat and failure to retain a fully feathered wing – one instance of each.”

GMA has not issued any media releases about the five promised prosecutions. (What happens to seized firearms? The public would like to know if/when the firearms are returned.) There were two fines (how large?) but the other illegal shooters merely got a “written warning” - a pathetically weak deterrent. It is interesting to note those matters that GMA considers “minor” and not deserving of any penalty:

- hunting from a moving boat: this is banned because it's unsustainable for the ducks, shifting the odds too far in favour of the shooter;
- using a shotgun at a wetland without having a hunting licence: did this man have a gun licence? Does GMA know who he is and where he lives? Did he ever pass a WIT test? What would he know about the hunting regulations if he is not even on the GMA data base to receive their letter about the new rules? The hunting rules exist to moderate the impact on sustainability. Licensing exists to identify the user of the shotgun and introduce some accountability for his actions.
- possession and/or use of toxic shot: this was banned because of the serious pollution it leaves on wetlands, which is then ingested by wildlife.
- a fully feathered wing: this must be retained to prove the bird was one that can legally be shot. Failure to comply suggests the bird was likely killed illegally.

- f) It seems that the only way to obtain prosecutions against duck shooters is for duck rescuers to obtain video evidence and give that evidence to the media rather than to the GMA. This was evident in 2018 on the last day of the duck shooting season when rescuers captured images of a group of seven duck shooters using an airboat to flush waterbirds from the water and into their guns. Dramatic footage was broadcast by ABC TV and radio news and the Nine Network's Southern Cross regional news, and stories were published in regional newspapers. This led to the GMA seizing the airboat and laying charges against the shooters. At the time of writing we don't believe any of the prosecutions against the shooters involved have gone ahead. If rescuers hadn't been present at Cundare Pool, no one would have known about the illegal shootings. How many more of these incidents are happening on other wetlands that go undetected as there are still only five GMA compliance officers to cover the whole of Victoria?
- g) Compare GMA's soft approach to these significant offences with its draconian approach to prosecuting duck rescuers who are merely trying to assist wounded waterbirds abandoned by duck shooters. With the GMA banning rescuers from the wetlands, sometimes for the whole season, this means that there are fewer rescuers to help wounded native waterbirds. The banning order also highlights that the GMA isn't interested in retrieving wounded and suffering birds. If the GMA was serious about "humane hunting" it would provide veterinary care for wounded waterbirds. This should not just be left up to volunteers to do. Inexplicably, GMA (which claims to 'respect' native waterbirds in hunting – which is an oxymoron) has even banned the RSPCA from taking its high-tech mobile veterinary clinic to the wetlands.
- h) It seems the GMA's only real job is to service and protect the dwindling number of duck shooters who make up only 0.4 per cent of all Victorians. In 2018, only 0.2% of Victorians actually participated in duck shooting. The job of looking after Australia's native waterbirds is left to concerned members of the public who volunteer their services because they care about Australia's native waterbirds. GMA does not promote "humane hunting". GMA has failed in its self-proclaimed Mission to "work with the community as an effective, independent regulator". The community is opposed to the cruelty of duck shooting (*Morgan poll 2007: 87% of Victorians opposed duck shooting*). To allow shooters to target struggling, remnant duck populations in drought conditions is inconsistent with community views of a "fair go" for wildlife; it would further erode any remaining community confidence in this "regulator".

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14.12.18

Attachments: (1) Weekly Times 7 Nov 2018 Duck hopes dashed
(2) Ballarat Courier 7 July 2018 GMA seize airboat