

Submission to Game Management Authority

2019 Native Waterbird Shooting Season Considerations

By Regional Victorians OTDS Inc, (on behalf of rural Victorians directly impacted).



Australian Wood Duck, one of many native waterbird species unique to Australia, who form life-long pairs, on a significant long term decline.

Summary

- Continued significant long term decline in abundance, breeding and habitat
- Hotter and drier environmental conditions persist (despite bursts of rain)
- Insufficient data regarding impact of shooting on native waterbird populations
- Inability to monitor compliance
- Significant changes in the 40+ years since the Wildlife Act 1975 was established
- To allow a further season would be irresponsible and against respect for sustainability

Introduction

Whilst an annual native waterbird shooting season is allowed under the Wildlife Act 1975, when environmental conditions dictate, the Agriculture and Environment Ministers can alter a season. Part of the Game Management Authority's (GMA) role is to make recommendations to Ministers regarding season closures to ensure sustainability.

Regional Victorians Opposed to Duck Shooting Inc welcome the invitation to submit comment for the first time.

We have been advised that the lack of safety risk assessment for residents and the lack of research into social and economic impacts of duck shooting, is not in scope (we believe highly relevant). This submission is focused on environmental, waterbird abundance and habitat factors.

Habitat, Distribution and Abundance

East Australia Annual Waterbird Survey “*the most significant piece of data on bird numbers*” (Graeme Ford; GMA), is the most comprehensive, independent, professional scientific long term data set available.

<p>Significant long term downward trend, continuing to be well below average with game bird numbers low by order of magnitude – East Australia Annual Waterbird Survey.</p>
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- The 34th annual survey in 2016, showed the *lowest number of waterbirds ever recorded*, with game bird species low “by order of magnitude”. A season should have been cancelled to provide our native waterbirds with an opportunity to recover in number.
- The 35th survey in 2017 again showed a long term decline in abundance, breeding and habitat, with low rainfall and high temperatures and game bird numbers low by order of magnitude. Again, a shooting season should have been cancelled but was allowed for shooters, it is assumed based on an increase in number of some bird species – despite that increase being from the *lowest base ever recorded* and their numbers still being well below average.
- The 36th survey now in hand, is worse again (Fig 1). “All major indices (abundance, breeding index, number of species breeding and wetland area) show significant declines”. Waterbird abundance “decreased considerably from 2017 and remains well below average” with most game species abundances “well below long term averages in some cases by an order of magnitude”. There were continued long term declines in breeding species richness with the wetland area index well below long term average. We believe it’s obvious, to allow a further shooting season would be irresponsible.

Specific examples of results for our native waterbirds, many unique to Australia;

- Pacific Black Duck – **Decline & well below average**
- Australasian Shoveler – **Decline & well below average**
- Chestnut Teal – **Decline and well below average**
- Grey Teal – **Decline and well below average** (interestingly this was at average last year. Now it is recorded at the lowest level in 36 years, which we believe reflects the fragility of populations which could otherwise look stable at a point in time)

- Freckled Duck – Unique to Australia, believed to be one of the world’s rarest birds – Decline & well below long term average if not at the lowest level ever recorded
- Mountain Duck – Decline and well below average
- Pink-eared duck – Graphs show decline and numbers well below average
- Plumed whistling Duck – well below average
- Australian Wood Duck – Decline and well below average

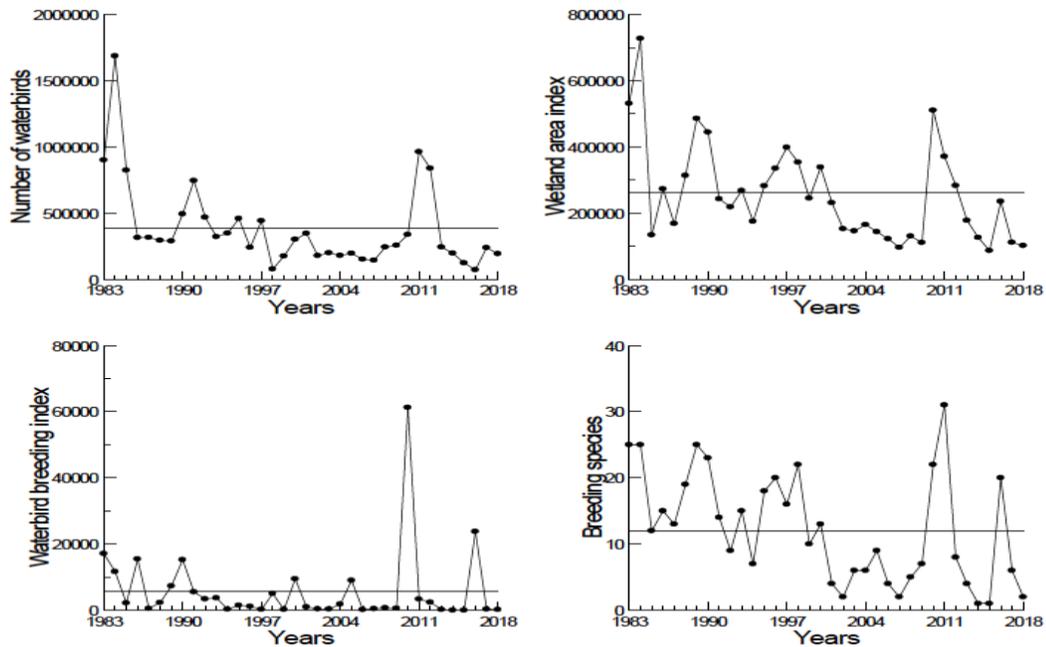


Figure 1. Changes over time in total abundance, wetland area, breeding and number of breeding species in the Eastern Australian Waterbird Survey (1983-2018); horizontal lines show long-term averages.

The only exception to this heartbreaking long term trend of decline, was Hardhead, just making it back to the long term average, but still at the mercy of habitat and climate woes and requiring our protection in Victoria.

The dire situation of plummeting habitat, breeding and abundance indices, is further exacerbated by exceptionally dry weather with significant rainfall deficiencies and warmer temperatures in 2017/2018, set to continue into 2019.

Environmental Conditions

Birds are twice as vulnerable to climate change as mammals, an international team of scientists has concluded after checking 481 species in 987 populations around the world (*Global Change Biology, Zoological Society of London*).

- Rainfall summary (Bureau of Meteorology December 2018): “Drier than average summer likely for northern Australia and large parts of WA”. For the remainder of the country “there are roughly equal chances of a wetter or drier three months” This is the same forecast as was issued last year, preceding intense dry in early 2018.
- El Nino Alert (Bureau of Meteorology December 2018) continues with likely El Nino effects over summer including higher fire risk and a greater chance of heatwaves.
- Climate Outlook (Bureau of Meteorology December 2018) - “warmer than average days and nights are likely for almost all of Australia for December to February”.
- Special Climate Statement 66 - An abnormally dry period in Eastern Australia (Bureau of Meteorology November 2018)– “an abnormally dry period in Eastern Australia” reported long term rainfall deficiencies April 2012 to September 2018 in QLD, NSW and Vic. October 2018 rains were reported as not enough. We need long term sustained rain to address the problem.

Notably, it is reported that a major rain event in December 2017 had little impact. Most intense of the dry season started early 2018.

September 2018 was the driest September and second driest month on record. There is a clear downward trend in rainfall in south east Australia, particularly Victoria. Drought takes place against a backdrop of consistently rising temperatures.

Critical Sustainability Factors

Insufficient Data

It is clear, given lack of monitoring, there is grossly inadequate data regarding the true impact of shooting on our struggling native waterbird populations. Decisions to allow seasons have hence

been made which are not sufficiently evidence based. We believe this is irresponsible given the independent expert scientific reports including EAAWS, which every year, have cited evidence for why the seasons should be ceased.

We note GMA quote results from a telephone survey of a small number of shooters to provide estimate of native waterbirds being shot.

However a survey of shooters utilized to estimate economic benefit of duck shooting in 2013 (Estimating the Economic Impact of Hunting in Victoria) was believed by the survey managers to hold some bias in spend estimates. It is possible that bias may also exist in the estimate of bird numbers shot.

Importantly, it is not possible to monitor the number and species of birds shot at thousands of waterways across Victoria and there is insufficient data collected through shooters' bag checks as reported in The Arthur Rylah Hunters Bag Survey reports. This means the real measure of what birds are shot cannot possibly be known.

Insufficient Regulation and Monitoring.

- The Arthur Rylah Hunters Bag Survey 2017 stated hunters' bags were checked at only 31 wetlands (out of thousands) "with some level of coverage" when returning to their cars or camp. This is grossly inadequate given declining numbers of birds reported by scientists and the previous issues of Box Flat, Lake Toolondo and Koorangie (issues largely unknown to the public if it weren't for volunteer's witnessing and reporting the events.) These checks missed birds that had been shot on the water, (found later, washed ashore or buried in pits).

Only a handful of wetlands were checked by GMA 2017 for wounded or unrecovered birds. Even just at these few, 18 birds were discovered by authorities including 9 dead swans and 2 dead pelicans.

- The Arthur Rylah Hunters Bag Survey 2018 reported that shooters bags were checked at only 19 wetlands – almost half the already low number- with "some degree of coverage". (Australasian Shoveler – illegal to shoot - was found in bags). **Only one** wetland was checked for wounded or non-game birds, so this data is sadly unknown.

It is extremely concerning, particularly given the results of the Pegasus Report in early 2018, that more focus was not afforded this critical monitoring of birds shot

In both the 2017 and 2018 reports, Arthur Rylah Institute clearly state that “Estimating the daily take is an important component of assessing the impact of the duck season on populations of game bird species” and that the survey “needs to include a larger number of wetlands, more evenly spread across the State”. This advice has not been heeded.

Relevant Background Considerations

The Wildlife Act was put in place over 40 years ago. Since then there has been significant change.

- Significant biodiversity loss. Scientists world wide agree, we are in the midst of the 6th mass extinction, with species being lost 1000 times the rate of evolution. Of the 1870 globally threatened bird species, 75% have been adversely impacted by human activity including hunting (*State of The World's Birds*). Australia is sadly known as one of the worst performing countries for biodiversity protection. With over 45% of our bird species unique to Australia, including our native waterbird species shot each year, they require urgent protection in Victoria, as they do in other states.
- Animals have been found to be sentient beings. There is much evidence that birds, including native waterbirds, feel pain, fear and sorrow much like humans do. We also know many species pair for life. Aside from the obvious impact to those shot (conservatively estimated at 400,000 – 500,000- per year, *GMA's phone surveys*) there is a ripple effect through the entire species of shooting seasons. Otherwise healthy birds are shot who could breed and assist species recovery. Many birds who have lost a mate may grieve to the extent they will never recover or re-pair. (Professor's comment attached but confidential)
- Lead has been found to cause extreme suffering to wildlife and ecosystems through toxicity. It is now banned in duck shooting but sadly still used. On the other hand, steel shot is quoted by duck shooters to “go straight through”, leaving the birds wounded to fly off only to die slowly elsewhere. Steel is also believed to have the potential to cause fires (*Wildfire Today*).
- Climate change. There is no doubt that climate change is wreaking havoc on waterbird habitat, breeding patterns and abundance. There is a clear downward trend in rainfall in

South East Australia, particularly Victoria and consistently rising temperatures (*Bureau of Meteorology, Special Climate Statement 66*). As Australian native waterbirds struggle to adjust, we must provide them the same assistance and protection they receive in other states and territories like Queensland, NSW, WA and ACT.

- Changes in recreational interests. Less than 0.4% of the population shoot native waterbirds (*GMA license statistics*). Conversely there is significant and growing interest in nature based activities such as walking, running and cycling (*Marsden Jacob 2016*), with record participation recorded for bushwalking (up 14%), visits to nature parks and indigenous culture sites (*Tourism Research Australia*), activities which are logically impeded by duck shooting occurring in the same vicinity.
- Rural economic pressure. Agriculture is becoming less reliable due to climate change and market price fluctuations. Manufacturing is similarly as unpredictable. Rural Victoria must look to a new economic solution or face continuing financial decline (*Auditor General's Report followed by SGS Economics and Planning 2016 and 2018*).

Tourism contributes more to the Australian economy than agriculture (agriculture, forestry and fishing), employs 1 in 20 Australians, supports 1 in 8 businesses and for the third consecutive year has outperformed the national growth rate (*Tourism Satellite Account*). Nature based tourism is the fastest growing component (*Tourism and Transport Forum 2017*) bringing jobs and cash with it. Sadly, whilst many Victorian rural communities are rich in birdlife and wetland habitats which could attract the growing numbers of nature-based tourists, only 16% of would-be holiday makers are not deterred by shooting (*The Australia Institute 2012*).

- Rural population increases requiring safety considerations and jobs. More people now live around waterways where shooting takes place and this trend is set to continue through decentralization policy. Aside from having the right to safety and peaceful enjoyment of their properties, nature based activities and tourism- already worth \$7.4 billion and 71,000 jobs to Victoria (*Marsden Jacob 2016*)- could provide these people with much needed opportunities.

Conclusion

Based on the significant continued long term decline of our native waterbirds, the hotter and drier environmental pressures they face and the inability to monitor duck shooting, the 2019 season should be closed.

This is notwithstanding the lack of safety risk assessments/research into social and economic impacts to rural communities, or the proven cruelty to our native waterbirds, unacceptable in a modern society and the main reason other states and territories do not allow it.

Thank you for allowing us to comment.

Regional Victorians Opposed to Duck Shooting Inc

References

- Game Management Authority Obligations – GMA website
- Professors comment - Regional Victorians OTDS Blog
- Letters from Interstate Ministers – Regional Victorians OTDS Blog
- State of The World's Birds 2018
- “Estimate of duck and stubble quail” phone surveys GMA website
- Bureau of Meteorology Special Climate Statement 66, An abnormally dry period in Eastern Australia
- GMA License Statistics
- Victoria's Outdoor Economy Marsden Jacob 2016
- Tourism Research Australia 2018
- Tourism Satellite Account 2018
- SGS Economics & Planning Analysis 2016 & 2018
- Tourism & Transport Forum 2017
- Wildfire Today
- Global Change Biology, Zoological Society of London
- Submission to Regulatory Impact Statement for Victoria's Draft Wildlife Regulations 2012 -The Australia Institute
- Centre for Ecosystem Science Annual Aerial Waterbird Survey's 2016, 2017 & 2018
- The Arthur Rylah Institute Hunter Bag Surveys 2017 & 2018
- Ecosystems Across Australia are Collapsing under Climate Change – The Conversation 5th July 2018 (Professors and Senior Lecturer at University of Tasmania ns Macquarie University)
- Waterbirds at Risk as Irrigation Saps Floods in Murray Darling Wetlands –Sydney Morning Herald 4th July 2018
- Sheer Speed of Global Warming Decimating Birds Say Scientists – Haaretz correspondent 23rd July 2018

“Victorians and visitors from interstate and overseas seek to enjoy our wildlife”

“Victoria’s native wildlife are a unique and important part of the landscape. The Victorian government is committed to conservation of Victoria’s wildlife”

Lily D’Ambrosio, Minister for the Environment

