

VDHA SUBMISSION: 2021 DUCK SEASON



Victorian Duck Hunters Association Inc. Submission into the 2021 Duck Hunting Season

About:

The VDHA represents over a thousand members who identify as duck hunters. We aim to promote sustainable Duck Hunting and to Educate the general public on our tradition and way of life. The following submission into the 2021 Duck Season was prepared by the VDHA Executive on behalf of the VDHA membership and all Duck Hunters in Australia that hunt in Victoria.

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Part 1 (Habitat availability and population)

Habitat availability, distribution and extent:

The VDHA has organised duck counting crews over the months of November and December 2020 to collect data such as game bird numbers, water availability, signs of breeding and predominant species at the following State Game Reserves, wetlands and other known gamebird locations:

Location	Date	Est Numbers	Water	Breeding	Species
<u>Lake Connewarre (Hospital Swamps & Reedy Lake)</u>	13/11/20	25,000 game birds	Full 100% Capacity	Moderate numbers of hatchlings	The Pacific Black Duck are the predominant species. Other species recorded were Grey Teal, Chestnut Teal, Mountain Duck, Pink-Eared Duck and Blue-Winged Shoveler.
<u>Lake Corangamite</u>	19/12/20	5000+ game birds	50% Capacity	No signs of hatchlings but lots of young adolescent birds	The Grey Teal are the predominant species. Other species observed were Pacific Black Duck and Chestnut Teal
<u>Lake Wellington (Seacombe)</u>	19/12/20	3000+ game birds	Full 100% Capacity	No signs of hatchlings but lots of young adolescent birds	The Chestnut Teal is the predominant species. Other species found were Pacific Black Duck, Grey Teal and the Blue Winged Shoveler.
<u>Sandhill Lake (Kerrang)</u>	21/12/20	0 gamebirds	Dry	No signs of breeding	No game birds recorded.
<u>Lake Bael Bael</u>	21/12/20	0 Gamebirds	Dry	No signs of breeding	No game birds recorded.
<u>Koorangie</u>	21/12/20	0 Gamebirds	Dry	No signs of breeding	No game birds recorded.
<u>Lake Cullen</u>	21/12/20	4000+ Gamebirds	33% Capacity	No signs of hatchlings but lots of	The Pacific Black Duck, Grey Teal, Mountain Duck

				young adolescent birds	and Pink-Eared Duck were recorded.
<u>Lake Elizabeth</u>	21/12/20	800 - 1000 Game birds	85% Capacity	No signs of hatchlings but lots of young adolescent birds	The Pacific Black Duck was the predominant species. Other species recorded were Grey Teal, Mountain Duck and Pink-Eared Duck.
<u>Lake Martin</u>	29/12/20	400 – 600 Game birds	Low 20% Capacity	No signs of hatchlings but lots of young adolescent birds	The Grey Teal was the predominant species recorded. Other species recorded were the Chestnut Teal and the Mountain Duck.
<u>Racecourse Lake</u>	21/12/20	0 game birds recorded	Full 100% Capacity	No bird activity	No game birds recorded.
<u>Kerrang Area (channels, dams and creeks)</u>	21/12/20	500+	N/A	Moderate numbers of hatchlings	Young adolescent wood duck would be the predominant species.
<u>Hird Swamp</u>	21/12/20	2000+ Gamebirds	85% Capacity	No signs of hatchlings but lots of young adolescent birds	Predominantly Black ducks recorded.
<u>Johnson Swamp</u>	21/12/20	0 Game birds	Dry	No signs of breeding	No signs of game birds species besides a number of wood ducks on nearby dams
<u>Murphy Swamp</u>	20/12/20	No Birds	Dry	No signs of breeding	No signs of game birds species besides a number of wood ducks on nearby dams
<u>Gunbower Creek (near Cohuna)</u>	12/12/20	2000+ Game birds	Full 100% Capacity	No signs of hatchlings but lots of young	The Pacific Black Duck and Australian Wood Duck were the two predominant species. Other species

				adolescent birds.	witnessed were Grey Teal and Chestnut Teal.
Heart Morass	19/12/20	2000 - 5000+ Game birds	Full 100% Capacity	No signs of hatchlings but lots of young adolescent birds.	The Pacific Black Duck was the predominant species. Other species witnessed were Grey Teal, Chestnut Teal, Mountain Duck, Pink-Eared Duck and Blue-Winged Shoveler
Tang Tang Swamp	21/12/20	2000+	Full 100% Capacity	No signs of hatchlings but lots of young adolescent birds.	The predominant species were Pacific Black Duck, Grey Teal and Wood Duck.
<u>Werribee Water Treatment Facility</u>	20/11/20	60,000+ Game birds	Full 100% Capacity	Large numbers of hatchlings and young adolescent birds observed	The Pacific Black Duck was the predominant species. Other species recorded were, Grey Teal, Chestnut Teal and Pink-Eared Duck.

Controlled Water:

Many of the dry wetlands we surveyed are controlled and have not been allocated water in sometime.

EXAMPLE: Murphy Swamp has not been allocated water in over a decade, however when there is water, game and non-game birds fly far and wide to breed in this swamp. If swamps like Murphy Swamp were allocated water more often, duck populations would be higher.

Private and Public Dams:

Victoria has an estimated 450,000 dams equating to a storage capacity of around 3,400,000 megaliters of water¹.

¹ Environment, Land, Water and Planning Victoria (<https://www.water.vic.gov.au/managing-dams-and-water-emergencies/dams>);

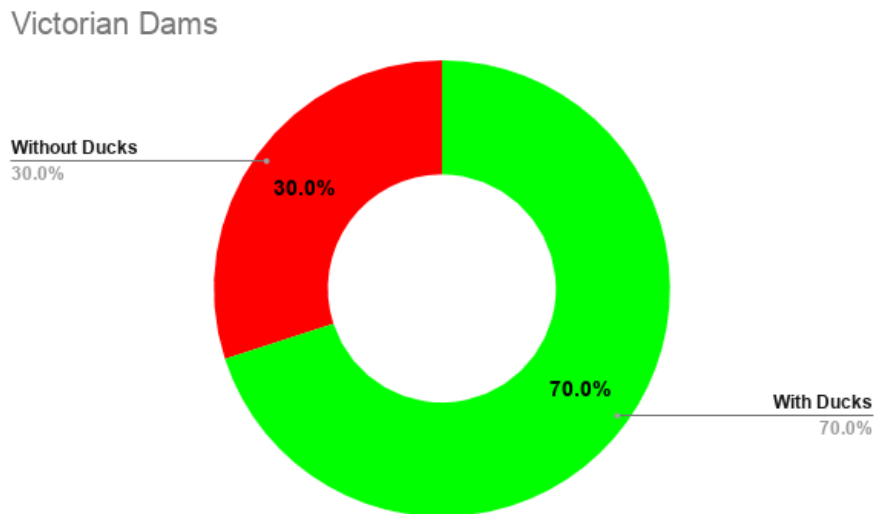
The VDHA has surveyed 200 private landowners with at least one dam on their property. The survey revealed that 7 out of 10 dams had regular game birds and that the predominant species of game bird was the Australian Wood duck.

This sample indicates that 70% of dams in Victoria have native game birds which equates to an estimated 315,000 out of 450,000.

Some dams had hundreds of game birds on them and others only a few. We made sure to be conservative in our estimates and we worked on the average number of 6 game birds found on dams with water at any given time. If you multiply the average number of game birds by the number of dams with birds on them, it would mean that there's an estimated 1,890,000 unaccounted game birds residing on dams in Victoria.

Formula: $6 \times 315,000 = 1,898,000$

Dams with game birds:	315,000
Average number of game birds:	6
Estimated game birds on dams:	Between 315,000 and 1,898,000.



The number of game and non-game birds on dams were not included in the GMA's considerations report or the EAWS.

Game duck populations:

The data collected by the VDHA indicates that there is a strong population of native game birds. and further suggests that game birds and non-game birds have been breeding multiple times throughout 2020, and expectations of a population boom in 2021.

Impacts of harvesting on game duck populations:

Sustainable hunting has no negative effect on duck populations and there is no conclusive data to suggest that it does. Many Duck hunting groups like the Victorian Duck Hunters Association (VDHA), Field & Game Australia (FGA), Sporting Shooters Association of Australia (SSAA) actively encourage duck population growth through nesting box programs and other conservation initiatives and efforts. Climate change and habitat loss are the main driving factors associated with game bird population figures² not hunting.

Game duck productivity:

66.66% of wetlands that were surveyed had strong signs of breeding and the areas that did not where dry. The following swamps and wetlands have evidence of breeding amongst native game birds and other waterfowl species:

- Gunbower Creek (near Cohuna)
- Lake Wellington (Seacombe)
- Lake Connewarre
- Lake Corangamite
- Werribee Water Treatment Facility
- Heart Morrass
- Lake Cullen
- Lake Elizabeth
- Kerrang Area
- Hird Swamp

In addition to the above, the count crews observed lots of game birds in local parks and on the side of main roads in the runoff drains with young hatchlings over the past few weeks. This is indicative of opportunistic breeding.

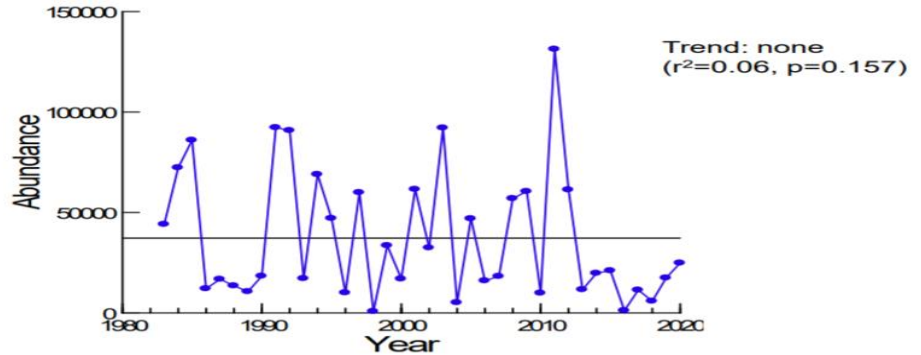
Duck Species:

- **Australian Wood Duck:**
The Australian wood duck was the most common duck we found on dams, local parks and general bodies of water outside of wetlands. The VDHA is of the firm belief that EAWS data is inaccurate by not including dams into the survey. The Wood Duck is quite common in regional Victoria on dams, creeks and rivers. There are 450,000 dams in Victoria and an estimated 70% have gamebirds (wood ducks) on them.

² Climate Change Adaptation Strategies for Australian Birds by *Stephen Garnett, Donald Franklin, Glenn Ehmke, Jeremy VanDerWal, Lauren Hodgson, Chris Pavey, April Reside, Justin Welbergen, Stuart Butchart, Genevieve Perkins and Stephen Williams*, Charles Darwin University (2013);

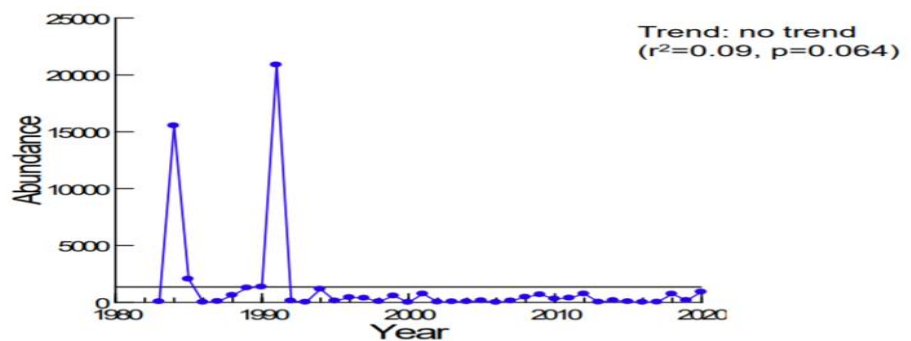
- **Pacific Black Duck:**

According to the EAWS the Pacific Black duck population is the highest it has been since the 2011/12. The Black Duck was also the most common duck we saw on wetlands during our duck counts.



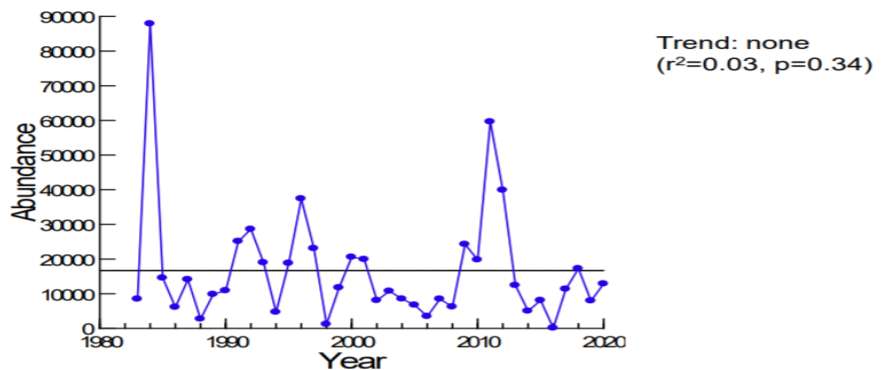
- **Chestnut Teal:**

According to the EAWS the Chestnut Teal population is at the highest since 1994. Their presence has been evident at some state Game reserves where the Chestnut Teal Population are clearly the predominant species.



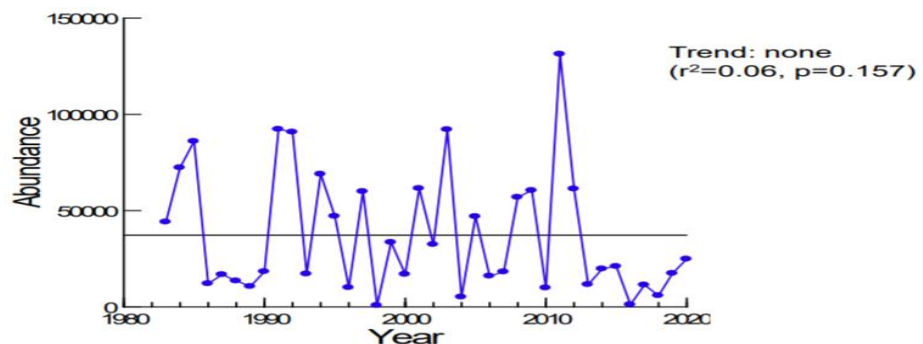
- **Hardhead:**

According to the EAWS the Hardhead population has increased since 2019 and is more in line to the 2018 population index which was just below the EAWS Yearly Average.



- **Pink-Eared Duck**

The Pink-Eared Duck species population index has increased significantly. The Pink-Eared Duck Population Index according to the EAWS is at their highest since 2012.



- **Blue Winged Shoveler population:**

Through the data collected and obtained, the VDHA has recorded an AVERAGE to MODERATE Blue Winged Shoveler population in the South West, South East and Port Phillip Regions. This indicates that the 2020 conditions have promoted ideal breeding opportunities for all waterbirds, including game birds such as the Blue Winged Shoveler.

Climate data:

Australia's weather is influenced by many different climate drivers. El Niño and La Niña have the strongest influence than any other climate driver in Australia. The natural cycle also known as El Niño-Southern Oscillation (ENSO). The ENSO cycle loosely operates over a 1 - 8 year period³.

A La Niña usually means:

- Increased Rainfall in Australia;
- Cooler daytime temperatures (south of the tropics);
- Warmer overnight temperatures (in the north)
- Shift in temperature extremes
- Flash flooding
- Greater tropical cyclone numbers
- Earlier monsoon onset

La Niña continues:

Victoria has received between 600mm to 1800mm⁴ of rain in the past 12 months during the La Niña with the next 3 - 4 months being the wettest season in the past 10 years.

According to the Bureau of Meteorology (BOM) and acknowledged by the GMA Considerations report, the La Niña is expected to peak in the first quarter of 2021 right up until the start of the legislated duck season⁵. Game and Non-Game Birds will have plenty of additional habitat and an increased opportunity to breed.

³ Bureau of Meteorology, Australian Government
(<http://www.bom.gov.au/climate/updates/articles/a020.shtml>);

⁴ Rainfall Maps, Bureau of Meteorology, Australian Government,
(<http://www.bom.gov.au/climate/maps/rainfall/?variable=rainfall&map=totals&period=12month®ion=nat&year=2020&month=11&day=30>) ;

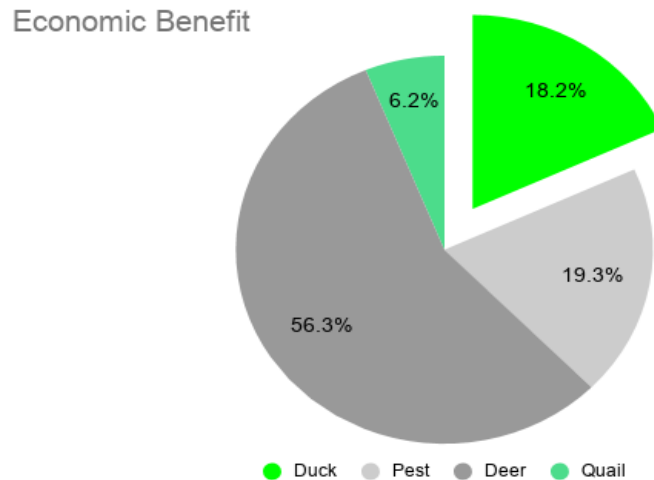
⁵ ENSO Outlook, Bureau of Meteorology, Australian Government
(<http://www.bom.gov.au/climate/enso/outlook/>);

Part 2 (Other relevant additional information):

Economic Benefits of Duck Hunting:

The VDHA strongly believes that a full bag and season translates into increased participation amongst game license holders resulting in a flow on effect of economic benefit to rural and regional Victoria.

Duck and Quail Hunting in Victoria brought in a combined \$87 Million dollars to the Victorian Economy as per the 2019 Report by the Department of Jobs, Precincts and Regions (DJPR)⁶ and it is imperative that a full season is announced to provide small and regional businesses relief post the 2020 Coronavirus Pandemic.



Comparing the EAWS Data:

The VDHA compared the data from the 2020 Eastern Australia Waterbird Survey (EAWS) to previous years where a full unmodified season was announced and made the following findings:

- 2020 EAWS results compared to 2013 EAWS reveal that populations and habitat were almost identical. **A full season was scheduled for the 2014 season.**
- 2020 EAWS wetland area index is equivalent to the 2017 EAWS. **A full season was scheduled for the 2018 season.**
- 2020 EAWS waterbird breeding index equivalent to the 2017 EAWS. **A full season was scheduled for the 2018 season.**
- 2020 EAWS total gamebird numbers are significantly higher than the 2016 EAWS results. **A full season was scheduled for 2017.**

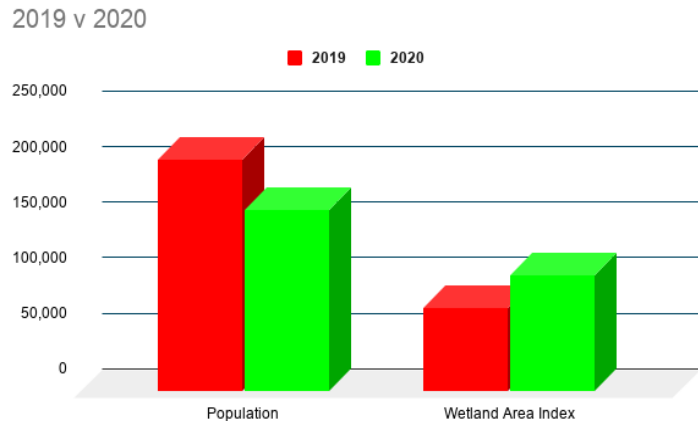
The comparable data suggests that the 2020 conditions are similar and, in some cases, better than previous years where a full season (12 weeks + 10 bird bag limit). There is no reason why the season should not proceed unmodified.

⁶ Department of Jobs, Precincts and Regions (DJPR) (<https://djpr.vic.gov.au/game-hunting>);

Wide dispersal of game ducks

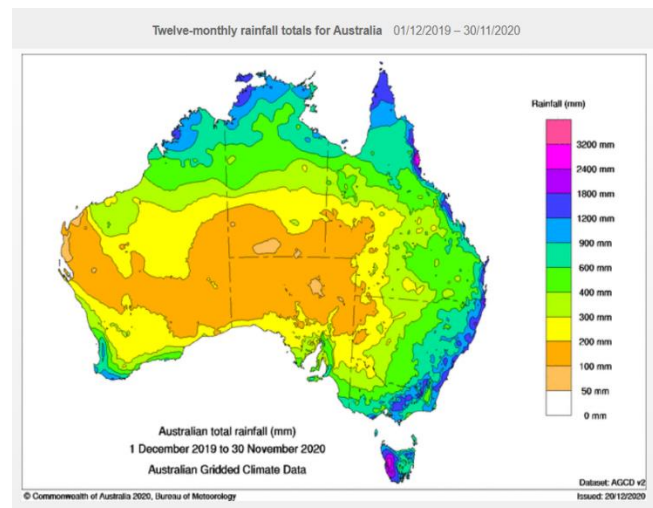
The GMA Considerations report and the EAWS notes that there has been an increase in habitat (water), however a decrease in the population abundance index. The reason for this decrease is because when there's water readily available, the concentration of game birds in a few main locations reduces. This is because gamebirds are not limited for choice when it comes to habitat.

As per the bar graph, the Wetland Area Index has grown from 75,239 ha in 2010 to 104,015 ha in 2020 (increase of 28,776 ha) and the population index has reduced. What this does not consider, is that the wetland habitat has also grown in NSW and the Murry-Darling Basin meaning that Game birds have habitat opportunities across most of Eastern Australia.



This clearly shows that the EAWS is not the best method at determining the game bird population or the foundations for the season recommendation.

A good indicator that waters is readily available and game bird populations are dispersed and not concentrated is the Werribee Water Treatment facility which had an estimated 60,000+ population on the 20/11/20. While 60,000 seems like a lot, in years when water is in limited supply the Werribee Water Treatment Facility can house a population of 120,000+.



Victoria has received between 600mm to 1800mm⁷ of rain in the past 12 months during the El Niña with the next 3 - 4 months being the wettest season in the past 10 years. Game and Non-Game Birds will have plenty of additional habitat and an increased opportunity to breed.

⁷ Rainfall Maps, Bureau of Meteorology, Australian Government, (<http://www.bom.gov.au/climate/maps/rainfall/?variable=rainfall&map=totals&period=12month®ion=nat&year=2020&month=11&day=30>) ;

Part 3 (VDHA Summary)

After careful consideration of the data collected by the Victorian Duck Hunters Association and provided by the Game Management Authority, the VDHA has formed the view that the 2021 Duck Hunting Season should proceed unmodified, as is entrenched in Victorian Legislation.

The VDHA recommends the following:

- 1.** Twelve (12) Week Full Season
- 2.** Ten (10) Game Birds per day
- 3.** The inclusion of two (2) Blue Wing Shovelers in the daily bag limit.

Due to the reduced 2020 duck season and the abundance of water available to native game and non-game birds, ducks have had the opportunity to breed multiple times in the year.

Despite there being a reported decline in native duck numbers in the GMA Considerations Report as well as the EAWS⁸, both reports fail to take into account that bird population density has reduced because of the increase in habitat (water available across the country) or the number of game birds in local parks and private/public dams. Our data suggests by excluding dams and parks in the GMA considerations report and EAWS that there could be a further 315,000 to 1,898,000 birds missing in the population reports.

Further information by the GMA Considerations Report suggest that January - March 2021 will be “wetter than average⁹”, thus creating the ideal conditions for optimal breeding, population growth and a sustainable full season.

Other Recommendations:

The VDHA further recommends the following points for consideration by the Game Management Authority:

4. An end to the modified start time (opening Weekend):

- The VDHA understands that the rationale of the Game Management Authority to implement a trialed start time on the opening weekend of Duck Season in 2018 – 2019 was to minimise confrontation between hunters and anti-hunting protestors. The trial continued in the very short 2020 duck season and as a result overall participation was reduced amongst hunters. The VDHA does not believe that the

⁸ Eastern Australian Waterbird Survey 2020;

⁹ Pg 42 (summary), Considerations for the 2021 duck hunting season, Game Management Authority;

trialed late start time has been successful, nor should it be continued.

- The VDHA recommends a return to the traditional start time.

5. Legitimate Reasons to obtain a Game License:

- The VDHA recommends “restricting” Game Licenses to hunters only and to deny licenses to anti-hunting protestors as is implied in Section 22A of the *Wildlife Act*¹⁰.

Section 22A, Subsection (1) states:

“The Game Management Authority may license a person to hunt, take or destroy game”.

- Protesting is not a legitimate reason to obtain a Game License and the VDHA recommends that any person found having a license for an illegitimate reason such as gaining access to State Game Reserves (Wetlands) for the purpose of protesting, should have their license suspended and cancelled.

Allowing anti-hunting protestors to obtain a game license for the purpose of protesting is dangerous.

Our recommendation coincides with Section 25AB, Subsection 1 of the *Wildlife Act 1975*¹¹:

“The Game Management Authority must cancel a wildlife license in respect of specified birds or a game license if the Authority is satisfied on reasonable grounds that the holder knowingly provided false or misleading information with the application”

- The VDHA is of the belief that by stopping anti-hunting protestors from entering the swamps and game reserves during the duck season that it will cease confrontation between hunters and anti-hunting protestors. It will also allow hunters to participate in their pastime and anti-hunting protestors to continue to protest in a safe manner away from any danger outside of State Game Reserves.

¹⁰ (1) 22A *Wildlife Act 1975* (Vic);

¹¹ 25AB, SS(1), *Wildlife Act 1975* (Vic);

6. Health and Safety of Hunters and Anti-Hunting Protesters:

- Under Section 58D of the *Wildlife Act 1975*¹², anti-hunting protesters are not allowed within 10 meters of a hunter or their decoys. The VDHA strongly believes that this distance is unacceptable and is concerned for the safety and welfare of the anti-hunting protesters and hunters.
- Anti-hunting protesters pose a real threat to themselves and hunters by displaying unpredictable and irrational behavior.
- A 12 Gauge Shotgun has a fallout range of approximately 200 meters.
- Hunters are required by law to act in accordance with strict laws and regulations and the anti-hunting protesters often use this to their advantage by trying to trick or manipulate hunters into reacting to their unethical behavior.
- In the absence of adopting recommendation **5.**, We strongly recommend increasing the distance between anti-hunting protesters and hunters to 100 meters or more.

7. Enforcement of Section 58E (*Hindering or Obstructing a Hunt*):

- During the 2020 Duck Season, there were a number of unwanted interactions between anti-hunting protesters and hunters on State Game Reserves and wetland. Hunters have reported being harassed and obstructed when hunting on a regular basis. Many of our members feel that little has been done by the Game Management Authority to ensure that Section 58E is being enforced.
- The VDHA recommends the GMA enforce Section 58E by charging any anti-hunting protesters who interfere with, harass, hinder and or obstruct hunters who are engaged in hunting as is defined in Section 58E of the *Wildlife Act 1975*¹³.

The Act states:

“A person must not interfere with, harass, hinder or obstruct a person who is engaged in hunting or taking game in accordance with this Act.”

¹² 58D *Wildlife Act 1975* (Vic);

¹³ 58E, *Wildlife Act 1975* (Vic)

8. Incorporate game population on dams into population data:

- The VDHA recommends that the data collected by the VDHA regarding the number of birds on dams be included when taking into consideration the number of game birds in the State.
- The VDHA further recommends that the GMA include dams for game bird population figures in future surveys and reports.

9. Water Allocation:

- Most of the State Game Reserves that are currently “Dry” are so because their water supply is controlled and have not been allocated water in a longtime. The VDHA encourages the GMA to look into new practices to ensure that State Game Reserves have water allocated to them.

References

- *Wildlife Act 1975* (Vic);
- *Wildlife Regulations 2013*;
- Eastern Australian Waterbird Survey 2020;
- Considerations for the 2021 duck hunting season, Game Management Authority;
 - Bureau of Meteorology, Australian Government (<http://www.bom.gov.au/climate/updates/articles/a020.shtml>)
- Climate Change Adaptation Strategies for Australian Birds by *Stephen Garnett, Donald Franklin, Glenn Ehmke, Jeremy VanDerWal, Lauren Hodgson, Chris Pavey, April Reside, Justin Welbergen, Stuart Butchart, Genevieve Perkins and Stephen Williams*, Charles Darwin University (2013);
- Department of Jobs, Precincts and Regions (DJPR) (<https://djpr.vic.gov.au/game-hunting>);
 - Environment, Land, Water and Planning Victoria (<https://www.water.vic.gov.au/managing-dams-and-water-emergencies/dams>)