

Duck hunting season 2023

RSPCA Victoria submission

05.01.2023



About RSPCA Victoria

RSPCA Victoria is a non-government, community-based charity that works to prevent cruelty to animals by actively promoting their care and protection. Since its establishment in 1871, and as member of RSPCA Australia (the federation of eight state and territory organisations in Australia), the RSPCA has collectively become Australia's leading animal welfare charity.

Across the state, RSPCA Victoria's community services include work undertaken by our Inspectorate, Animal Care Centres, Clinics and Education teams. RSPCA Victoria operates Animal Care Centres across Victoria, providing refuge, care and new homes where possible to more than 14,000 animals every year. Our team of Inspectors works to protect animals from cruelty, receiving more than 10,000 reports every year, prosecuting offenders and rescuing animals from dangerous situations. Our Education team contributes to prevention strategies by influencing over 8,000 young people each year about the value and importance of animals in our lives.

RSPCA Victoria works to educate the community regarding animal welfare and works with government and industry to ensure the standard of animal welfare and care continues to improve.

RSPCA policies are a collection of statements developed to improve the welfare of animals in Australia. These policies are underpinned by scientific evidence and must be agreed upon and amended by a unanimous vote from the RSPCA National Board, following a robust consultation process with each state and territory RSPCA.

Contents

<u>INTRODUCTION</u>	<u>3</u>
<u>RSPCA VICTORIA RECOMMENDATIONS</u>	<u>3</u>
<u>RSPCA POLICY</u>	<u>4</u>
<u>DUCK WELFARE</u>	<u>4</u>
<u>CLIMATE OUTLOOK</u>	<u>6</u>
<u>GAME BIRD ABUNDANCE</u>	<u>7</u>
<u>COMMUNITY OPPOSITION TO DUCK HUNTING</u>	<u>9</u>

RSPCA Victoria recommendations

1. RSPCA Victoria believes duck hunting should be banned due to the inevitable suffering of native ducks.
2. Acknowledging that duck hunting is currently lawful, if it is to continue, as a matter of priority, the Waterfowl Wounding Reduction Action Plan must be implemented and monitored to determine efficacy of achieving its aims.
3. Due to the inevitable welfare impacts caused by hunter disturbance to native waterbirds, duck hunting should be banned.
4. As climate outlook data does not support sustainable duck hunting, duck hunting should cease.
5. As long-term declines in game bird species abundance have not recovered with increased habitat, duck hunting must be banned in Victoria to allow game bird populations to recover and be sustainable into the future.
6. The remake of the Wildlife (Game) Regulations 2012 provides an invaluable opportunity to ban duck hunting in Victoria.
7. As the majority of the Victorian population is extremely concerned about the animal welfare impacts of duck hunting and support a ban on duck hunting, this should be enacted to uphold community expectations.

Introduction

RSPCA Victoria appreciates the opportunity to provide a submission to the Game Management Authority (GMA) regarding our suggestions for modifications to the 2023 duck hunting season. In this submission we will outline the reasons we believe the 2023 season should be cancelled and why duck hunting should cease permanently.

RSPCA policy

The RSPCA is opposed to the hunting of any animal for sport as it causes unnecessary injury, pain, suffering, distress or death to the animals involved.

Duck welfare

Wounding

We are pleased to note that RSPCA Victoria's long expressed concerns on the lack of information on the wounding rate of ducks during the Victorian hunting season has seen the GMA investigate this issue. We note that in the draft Waterfowl Wounding Reduction Action Plan, the GMA has now acknowledged that research has revealed the wounding rate for ducks could be between 6-40%.

Surveys of water bird wounding losses in Australia were undertaken between 1953 to 1982, but no recent studies have been conducted. A study that examined the impact of hunting activity on four species of native ducks in Victoria from 1972 to 1977, reported 14% to 33% of birds were wounded but not retrieved¹. An x-ray study of trapped live ducks in Victoria from 1957 to 1973 reported that 6% to 19% of ducks had sustained embedded shotgun pellets in their bodies from duck hunting².

Using the reported total harvest figure of 262,567 ducks from the 2022 season and the aforementioned wounding rate of 6-40%, would mean that between 15,700 and 105,000 ducks were wounded and not killed outright in the 2022 season. Assuming a median wounding rate of 17%, the wounding rate would be 44,636 ducks. While RSPCA Victoria would like to see no birds wounded, this current rate of wounding is unacceptably high. Wounded birds not retrieved and killed will suffer; some will eventually die from their injuries and birds with less serious injuries may survive with embedded shotgun pellets. Wounded birds can suffer from the pain and disabling effects of their injuries, from sickness due to wound infection, or from thirst or starvation. Injuries to the bill often lead to an inability to drink or eat. Wing fractures are also common and, as with other injuries, wounded birds are at a heightened risk of being attacked by a predator.

¹ Norman FI & Powell DGM (1981) 'Rates of recovery of bands, harvest patterns and estimates for black duck, chestnut teal, grey teal and mountain duck shot during Victorian open seasons, 1953-77', *Australian Wildlife Research*, 8:659-664.

² Norman FI (1976) 'The incidence of lead shotgun pellets in waterfowl (Anatidae and Rallidae) examined in south-eastern Australia between 1957 and 1973', *Australian Wildlife Research*, 3:61-71.

The draft Waterfowl Wounding Reduction Action Plan outlines the following causes of wounding:

- Poor shooting skills
- Shooting at birds at distances greater than 30 metres
- Hunters shooting beyond their maximum shooting skills distance or capability of technology
- Use of suboptimal load and choke choices for the species being hunted
- Shooting into flocks and sub-lethally striking non-target birds
- Dropping birds in heavy cover where they cannot be retrieved
- Failure to have an effective retrieval strategy in place, including the use of a well-trained retriever dog.

While duck hunting remains legal, it is vital that programs are undertaken in order to target the causal factors of wounding as a matter of priority.

RSPCA Victoria recommendations:

1. RSPCA Victoria believes duck hunting should be banned due to the inevitable suffering of native ducks.
2. Acknowledging that duck hunting is currently lawful, if it is to continue, as a matter of priority, the Waterfowl Wounding Reduction Action Plan must be implemented and monitored to determine efficacy of achieving its aims.

Disturbance from hunters

A study by McDuie et. al (2021) found that ducks are dramatically impacted by anthropogenic disturbance in several ways. The researchers found that while ducks adjust to disturbance relatively quickly, this is due to substantial behavioural modifications that detrimentally affect their ability to obtain sufficient food³. The highest disturbance generally caused ducks to remain in sanctuaries and forego daytime foraging, but they also amended movement patterns to avoid the more moderate disturbance of humans moving about the wetland landscape by foot or boat, both of which had the effect of increased nocturnal movement/foraging. Persistent modification of natural movement patterns impacts species ecology producing physiological, behavioural, management and conservation implications.

The indirect effects on duck welfare from recreational hunter disturbance need to be recognised and addressed.

RSPCA Victoria recommendation:

3. Due to the inevitable welfare impacts caused by hunter disturbance to native waterbirds, duck hunting should be banned.

³ McDuie F et al. (2021) 'Informing wetland management with waterfowl movement and sanctuary use responses to human-induced disturbance', *Journal of Environmental Management*, 297.

Climate outlook

Over the past 22 years, rainfall in Victoria has been very much below average (see figure 1) and decreased by approximately 10 per cent during the cool season months (April to October)⁴. Rainfall in the cool season months is important as it is when peak streamflow occurs in most catchments, and it is more effective than warm-season rainfall in generating runoff⁵. Runoff is essential in the creation and maintenance of waterbird habitat as it affects water availability in the wetlands and sustains the health of riverine systems. It is projected that Australia's future climate will comprise of further decreases in cool season rainfall and longer periods of drought on average across many regions of southern and eastern Australia⁶. This outlook suggests that hunting will not be sustainable into the future due to ducks' reliance on long term rather than short term rainfall.

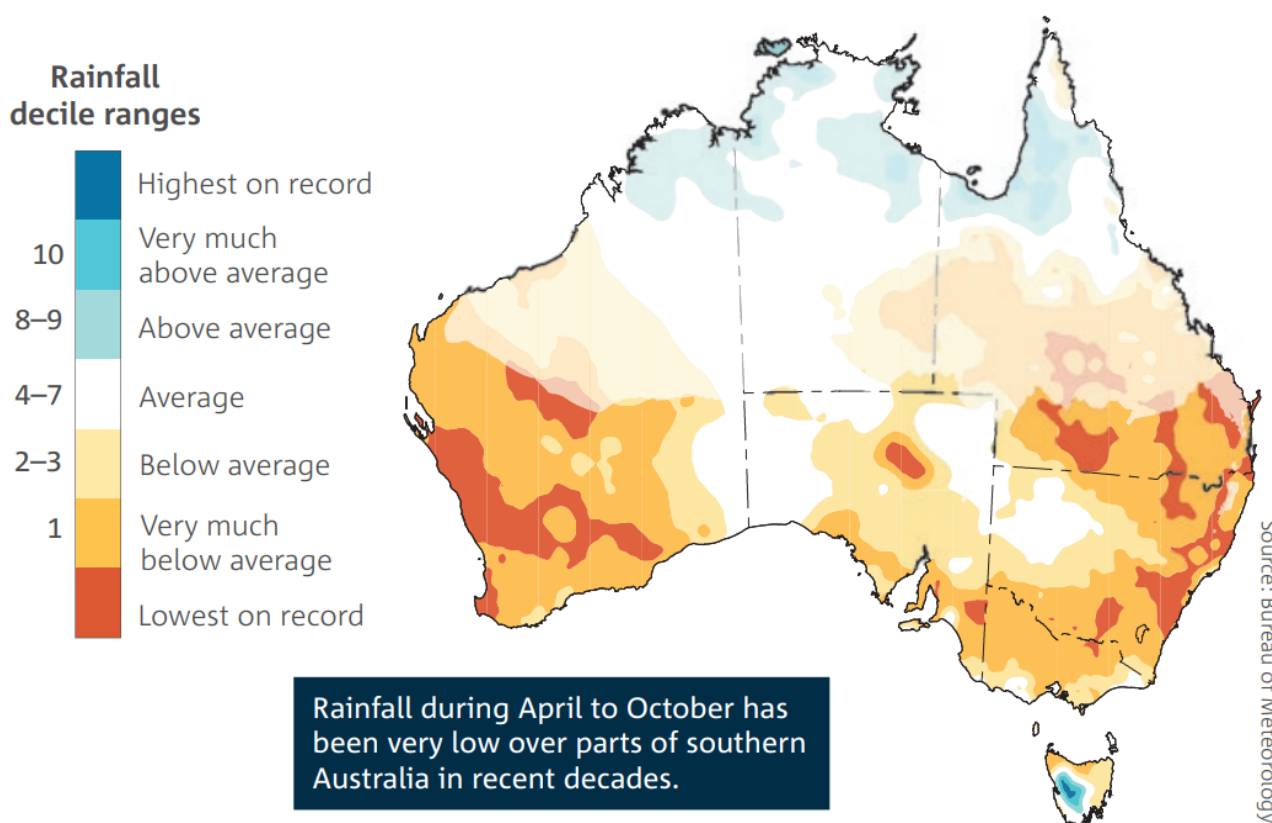


Figure 1 - April to October rainfall deciles for the past 22 years (2000-21). Map shows averages compared to all years from 1900.

RSPCA Victoria recommendation:

4. As climate outlook data does not support sustainable duck hunting, duck hunting should cease.

⁴ CSIRO & Bureau of Meteorology (2022) 'State of the climate 2022', Canberra: Commonwealth of Australia, <http://www.bom.gov.au/state-of-the-climate/2022/documents/2022-state-of-the-climate-web.pdf>, accessed 24 Nov. 2022.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid.

Game bird abundance

RSPCA Victoria continues to be concerned by the data provided in the Aerial Survey of Waterbirds in Eastern Australia each year, which demonstrates the dire conditions that wetland birds, and in particular, game birds are facing. Specifically, from the Aerial Survey of Waterbirds 2022 report⁷, we are concerned to note:

- Despite two successive La Niña years three major indices for waterbirds (total abundance, number of species breeding and wetland area index) continued to show significant declines over time.
- Total waterbird abundance in 2022 increased significantly from 2021 but still remained well below the long-term average, the 11th lowest in 40 years.
- 75% of total waterbird abundance was concentrated in a small number of wetlands; two of these wetlands supported more than 120,000 waterbirds representing 65% of the total abundance, both of which occur in the Murray-Darling Basin. These wetlands generally supported large breeding aggregations and high species diversity. Conversely around 41% of surveyed wetlands supported no waterbirds (includes wetlands that were dry).
- Duck abundance is well below the long term average (see figure 2), with some species of game duck abundances below average by an order of magnitude. Six out of eight species continued to show significant long term declines. Australian Wood Duck was the only species slightly above the long-term average. Some duck species declined in abundance compared to 2021 including the Grey Teal, Pink-eared Duck and Hardhead.

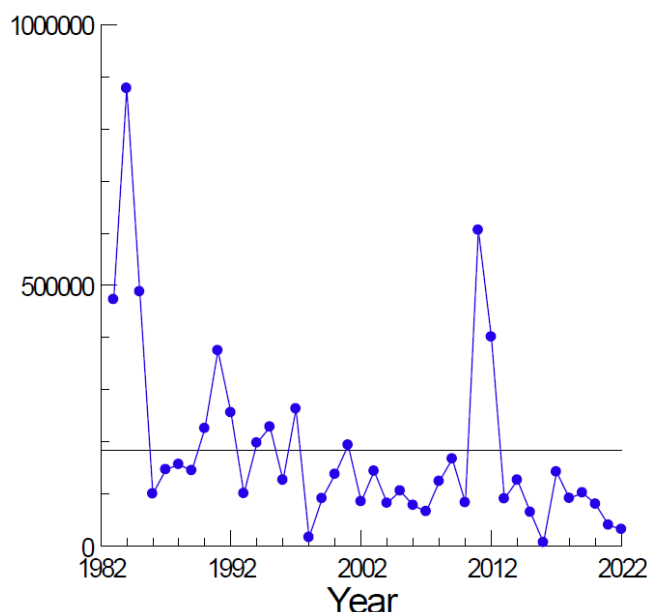


Figure 2 - Changes in duck abundance over time in the Eastern Australian Waterbird Aerial Survey (1983-2022); horizontal line shows long-term average

⁷ Porter JL et al. (2022) 'Aerial Survey of Waterbirds in Eastern Australia – October 2022 Annual Summary Report', *University of New South Wales, Sydney*.

We are very concerned to note that while there has been an increase in available habitat (i.e. in the Murray-Darling Basin) we have continued to see a decline in game duck abundance and the additional impact that hunting in these environments would have in terms of significant losses of birds. As outlined in the GMA considerations document⁸, habitat availability and game duck abundance have a positive relationship; however, the Aerial Survey of Waterbirds in Eastern Australia results show this is not the case. We are concerned that, despite successive years with La Niña conditions and an increase in species richness and species abundance, the increases are not in game species and therefore game duck species remain at risk.

We continue to be concerned that as there has not been a recovery in species abundance levels over a number of years, this could be an indicator of the beginning of a crisis in native game duck populations. The lack of waterbird species in many wetlands may signify that the population cannot sustainably support hunting as they are unable to return to regular abundance levels in those areas. In addition, waterbirds are very sensitive indicators of the health of entire wetland systems, because they are responsive to flow and the health of their environment, and the scarcity of waterbirds may denote greater issues with the ecosystem.

A range of unknown variables could be impacting the waterbird population numbers and therefore more research needs to be conducted to understand the decreasing trends, which will require sufficient time to be performed. The absence of waterbirds from many wetlands may suggest that there are variables negatively affecting the welfare of waterbirds and their likelihood for breeding. The welfare of other animal species that rely on waterbird populations may also be affected. Until the causes that are driving the reduction of waterbird populations are properly understood, we recommend that duck hunting should cease. The sustainability of duck populations is clearly at peril and anything that further impacts populations, such as duck hunting, must be avoided.

We note that in the 'Using duck proxies and surface water to inform hunting arrangements for 2023'⁹ document, it is recommended to have a daily bag limit of four ducks. This limit may be deemed low by hunters, considering the higher rainfall that has been experienced recently. However, based on the information ducks respond to long term rainfall deficiencies rather than recent rainfall, as duck counts have only shown low to moderate numbers. As mentioned above our view is that any negative impact on native waterbird populations must be avoided and no duck hunting season should occur to allow duck populations to recover.

In 2021, RSPCA Victoria made a submission to the Department of Jobs, Precincts and Regions review of the Wildlife (Game) Regulations 2012 which included a recommendation to remove the Blue-winged Shoveler (Australasian Shoveler) from the game list due to a continuing decline in numbers. Further supporting this removal, the Blue-winged Shoveler has been prohibited from hunting since 2015 and have been restricted most years since 1963. The most recent Eastern Australian Waterbird Aerial Survey shows that the number of Blue-winged Shovelers still remain well below the long-term average and therefore they should not be hunted in 2023. We believe that the Blue-winged Shoveler should no longer be listed as a game species and are concerned to note

⁸ Game Management Authority (2022) 'Considerations for the 2023 duck season'.

⁹ Klaassen M (2022) 'Using duck proxies and surface water to inform hunting arrangements for 2023'.

that as the review of the regulations have been delayed by 12 months, Blue-winged Shovelers remain on the game species list.

Based on current game bird abundance data, we believe that it is not possible to undertake a sustainable hunting season in 2023 and that duck hunting must be banned in Victoria to allow game bird populations to recover and be sustainable into the future.

RSPCA Victoria recommendations:

5. As long-term declines in game bird species abundance have not recovered with increased habitat, duck hunting must be banned in Victoria to allow game bird populations to recover and be sustainable into the future.
6. The remake of the Wildlife (Game) Regulations 2012 provides an invaluable opportunity to ban duck hunting in Victoria.

Community opposition to duck hunting

There are 6.5 million people living in Victoria¹⁰ and according to the GMA, in 2022 there were only 23,098 licensed duck hunters. Of those, it was estimated that only 11,549 actually hunted in 2022. This means that only 0.17% of the Victorian population are actively participating in duck hunting.

RSPCA Victoria engaged market research firm, Kantar, to assess Victorian's attitudes towards duck hunting. These findings span from all data collection from August 2019 to November 2022. In total, n=6,034 Victorians were surveyed throughout this period, with representative quotas set on age, gender and location.

This survey found that overall opposition to duck hunting remains high, with two in three Victorians (66%) stating that they oppose the activity (see figure 3). Of metropolitan residents 68% are opposed to duck hunting, while 61% oppose it in regional Victoria. Only one in twenty Victorians have or had an interest in participating in duck hunting, with barely 3% considering participation and 6% who had previously participated. A recent study also showed that there has been a decline in the numbers of active Victorian duck hunters by approximately 10% between 2009 and 2019¹¹.

¹⁰ 2021 Census Community Profiles, <https://www.abs.gov.au/census/find-census-data/community-profiles/2021/2>, accessed 13 Dec. 2022.

¹¹ Moloney PD et al. (2022) 'Bayesian modelling reveals differences in long-term trends in the harvest of native and introduced species by recreational hunters in Australia', *Wildlife Research*.

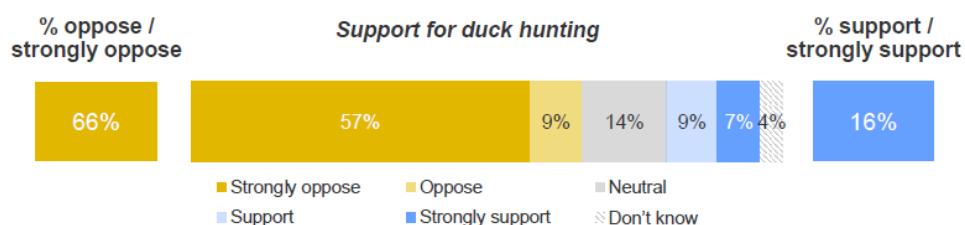


Figure 3 - Victorian's opposition/support for duck hunting

Two-thirds of Victorians (67%) are either *very* or *extremely* concerned about the long-term injuries to ducks who survive being shot and more than three in five (62%) are concerned with other non-game animals being shot by duck hunters (see figure 4).

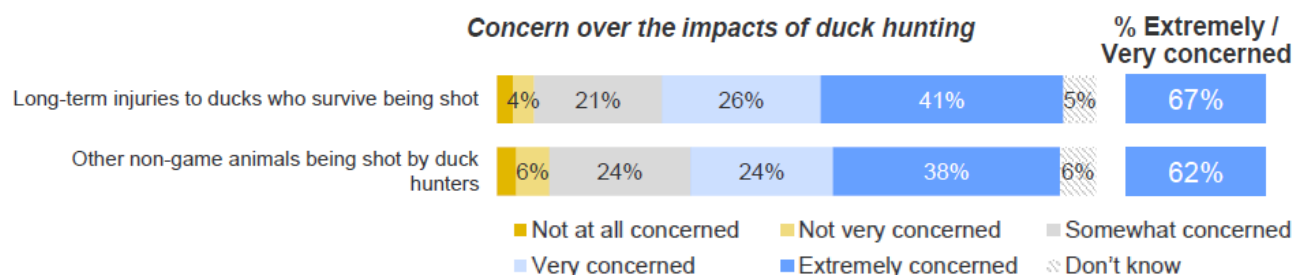


Figure 4 – Victorian's concerns over the impacts of duck hunting - % extremely/very concerned

This survey data continues to show that the animal welfare effects caused by duck hunting does not align with community sentiment and concerns – in particular Victorians are extremely concerned about those ducks that are wounded and not killed outright thereby subject to long-term injuries and suffering. It is therefore imperative that community expectations regarding the animal welfare impacts of native ducks are met and that duck hunting is banned in Victoria.

RSPCA Victoria recommendation:

- As the majority of the Victorian population is extremely concerned about the animal welfare impacts of duck hunting and support a ban on duck hunting, this should be enacted to uphold community expectations.



 03 9224 2222

 advocating@rspcavic.org.au

 3 Burwood Highway Burwood East VIC 3151

 rspcavic.org.au

05.01.23