

Recreational Native Waterbird Shooting Considerations for 2020

By Regional Victorians Opposed to Duck Shooting Inc. on behalf of those around the state adversely impacted.

Regional Victorians Opposed to Duck Shooting Inc. is calling for the 2020 duck shooting season to be completely closed based on dire environmental conditions, significantly declining waterbird indices and a lack of impact studies of duck shooting on the growing numbers of the public by the waterways.

Summary

- All major indices for waterbirds show significant declines over time, well below long term averages.
- 2019 wetland area index lowest recorded since surveys began 37 years ago.
- Waterbird abundance strongly related to rainfall and wetland habitat availability.
- Most of Australia has experienced below to very much below average rainfall and hotter/drier times are predicted which will further dry out remaining wetlands.
- Waterbirds less widely dispersed.
- Little breeding recorded, with swans and ibis being responsible for 97% of it.
- Unreliable harvest data– a critical component in ensuring sustainability.
- Insufficient data regarding impact of shooting on native waterbird populations.
- Inability to control duck shooting or sufficiently monitor compliance.
- Lack of risk assessment re impact of duck shooting on families around the waterways.
- Lack of impact studies on tourism / other more popular forms of recreation hampered by duck shooting.

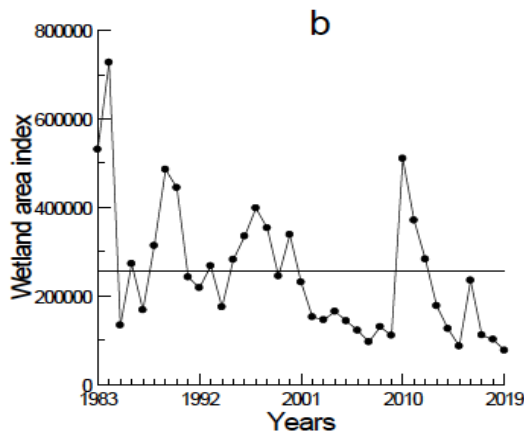
Introduction

Regional Victorians Opposed to Duck Shooting Inc. welcomes the invitation to submit comment for the second time. Evidence shows there is overwhelming reason to close the 2020 season. Previous Labor governments have closed seasons in 2003, 2007 and 2008 for less environmentally dire circumstances. With only 0.2 of one percent of the population shooting ducks, we submit this is GMA's opportunity to demonstrate independence to shooters and a respect for sustainability in recommending a season close.

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.

There is a significant long term downward trend of all indices, continuing to be well below average with wetland habitats the lowest since surveys began 37 years ago. (EAAWS)



Variable	1983-2019 All years	
	direction	regression
Total waterbird abundance	decline	$r^2=0.24, p=0.002$
Wetland area index	decline	$r^2=0.24, p=0.002$
Breeding index	decline	$r^2=0.12, p=0.041$
Breeding species richness	decline	$r^2=0.25, p=0.002$

All major indices for waterbirds; total abundance, breeding index, number of species breeding and wetlands area index, show significant declines over time, well below long term averages.

The slight increase in bird abundances observed in the annual aerial survey is likely to be from birds being more visible in stressed situations (drought). Long term trends are more informative for predicting population status than year to year fluctuations (*as per p 35 & 42 of considerations document*).

Victorian storage levels have already decreased by 10% and are likely to decrease further with ongoing hot dry spells predicted, further stressing habitat for already struggling bird populations.

Reduced wetlands across states mean there is limited opportunity for large scale movement between north and south. This means birds which have sought refuge in Victoria’s remaining wetlands will literally be “sitting ducks” for shooters if a season goes ahead, significantly impacting Australia’s native waterbird populations.

Environmental Conditions

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.

Across the country, unprecedented drought and environmental conditions are adversely affecting our native waterbirds, many species unique to our country.

The Murray Darling Basin - a critical breeding habitat for waterbirds - has experienced its worst drought period in 120 years and many critical wetland systems in the Basin are dry.

The future is grim, with experts predicting worsening climatic conditions and worsening drought across Australia. The Bureau of Meteorology, the CSIRO and any number of scientific bodies are pointing out that climate change will produce more frequent and severe droughts in the years ahead. (*Michael Rowland for ABC News Breakfast July 2019*).

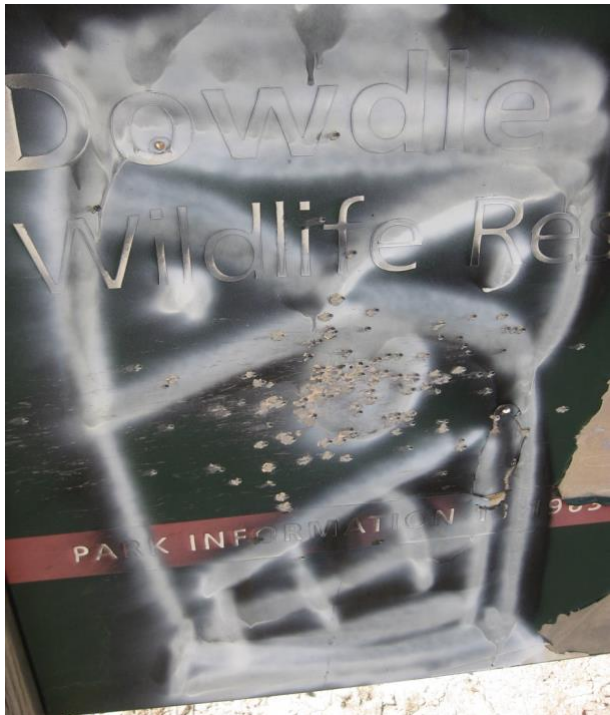
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Critical Sustainability Factors

“To effectively manage game species it is important to quantify the numbers harvested” (ARI / GMA)

- Insufficient and Unreliable Data of Bird Numbers Shot.
 - I. Estimates of numbers of birds shot are not only based on a small number of shooters then extrapolated out assuming the entire duck shooter base would be same, but reliant on shooters’ memories and honesty. *“Estimates of total harvest should be interpreted with caution” (page 25 of Harvest Estimates)*
 - II. As confirmed by Graeme Ford CEO GMA, Estimates do not include birds shot and left behind including protected species, found most years by the public. As most waterways are not monitored, the true number of birds shot including protected species is likely much higher.
 - III. Harvest estimates also miss the secondary ripple effect of shooting on bird populations. Otherwise healthy birds of breeding age are shot, reducing the chances of population recovery. Monogamous pairs are impacted, resulting in surviving partners unlikely to recover and death of offspring.

- No account is given to the impact of duck shooting to migratory birds who are particularly vulnerable to climate change and disturbance. Shooting disturbance impacts their ability to feed and rest prior to their long journeys. Migratory birds are suffering particularly high levels of decline and Australia are under numerous International obligations to protect them (<https://www.environment.gov.au/biodiversity/migratory-species/migratory-birds>).
- Lead is still used in duck shooting despite being illegal (as reported most years). Lead is extremely toxic to ecosystems, animals and people particularly women and children who consume even tiny traces. *“The literature suggests that significant insult to the brain of children occurs at very low levels and medical intervention with chelation fails to reverse such effects”*. (emedicine.medscape.com/article/1174752) Until this serious health and safety risk can be resolved, further shooting seasons should be ceased under the precautionary principle.
- 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*).
- Non – compliance. It is clear, whether authorities are present or not, duck shooting is not controllable. Some examples of the magnitude of waterbirds and protected species which are not accounted for in authorities “harvest statistics” are as follows. Sadly this is likely the tip of the iceberg as the vast majority of areas where duck shooting is allowed, are not monitored.
 - ⇒ Box Flat 2013 *“The bodies of about 760 game ducks and 155 non-game birds were left on the water at the Box Flat flood plains near Boort. The shooting happened on opening weekend of duck season”*. (ABC March 2013)
 - ⇒ Lake Toolondo 2016, *“The Andrews government is headed for a showdown in the courts over the illegal shooting of dozens of rare and threatened birds during the opening of duck season. The shooting occurred despite the presence of Victoria police and authorized compliance officers”*. (The Age April 2016)
 - ⇒ Kerang 2017, *“Another 437 birds have been recovered this week including 44 threatened freckled ducks from last weekend’s massacre at the marshes in northwest Victoria, recognized as a RAMSAR wetland of international importance. The total number of illegally shot freckled ducks now stands at 112. The latest find takes the total number of birds gunned down in the opening weekend shooting spree to 1,247 and this was from just one of Victoria’s wetlands. What happened on other wetlands?”*. (Medianet March 2017)
 - ⇒ *This year (2019) despite record low numbers of duck shooters, over 30 instances of hunting / firearm related offences were reported just at the few waterways authorities happened to be at on opening weekend.*



These photos show the reality faced by rural families and tourists during and after duck shooting.

Insufficient Regulation and Monitoring.

According to Arthur Rylah Hunters Bag Survey Reports;

- In 2017 hunters' bags were checked at only 31 wetlands (out of thousands) "with some level of coverage". Only a handful of wetlands were checked by GMA for wounded / unretrieved birds. Even just at these few, 18 birds were found including 9 dead swans and 2 dead pelicans.
- In 2018 bags were checked at only 19 wetlands and only one wetland was checked for wounded / unretrieved birds.
- In 2019 no wetlands were checked for wounded / unretrieved birds.



Birds left behind after duck shooting; including penguin, musk duck and pied cormorant (protected species). Picture Kim Wormald.

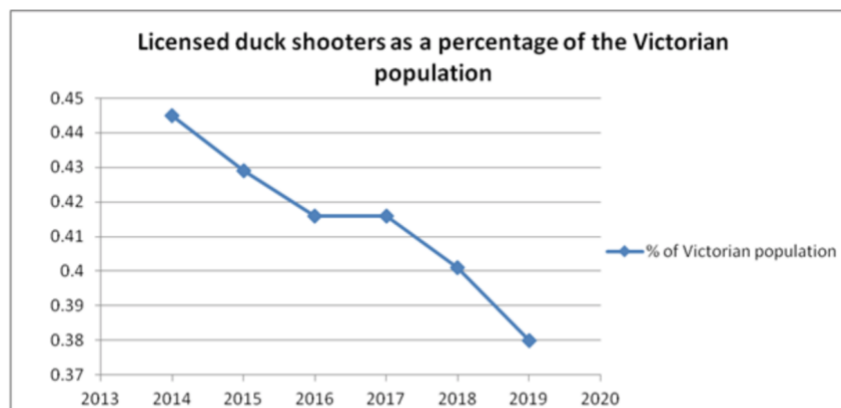
In both the 2017 and 2018 reports, Arthur Rylah Institute clearly state that "Estimating the daily take is an important component of assessing the impact of the duck season on populations of game bird species" and that the survey "needs to include a larger number of wetlands, more evenly spread across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

GMA reported 1300 duck shooters were at the waterways they monitored on opening weekend. Latest figures however report 10,000 duck shooters were active on opening weekend. If these figures are correct, it shows the magnitude of the unmonitored areas and likely much larger problems associated with non-compliance which went unreported.

Other Relevant Considerations

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

- Significant biodiversity loss. Of the 1870 globally threatened bird species, 75% have been adversely impacted by human activity including hunting (*State of The World's Birds 2018*). Sadly Australia is one the worst offenders in the world when it comes to general species extinction and Victoria has the highest number of threatened species by sub region in Australia. With over 45% of our bird species unique to Australia, including our native waterbird species shot each year, they require urgent protection at the few Victorian areas there is water.
- Animals have been found to be sentient beings. There is much evidence that birds feel pain, fear and sorrow. Ballistics experts advise at least one in four birds shot will not be killed outright. The cruelty involved in the nature of shotgun pellet dispersal is unavoidable and one of the main reasons other states have banned duck shooting. Until this critical aspect is rectified (important to 98% of Victorians according to Labor's *Animal Welfare Action Plan*), a further season must be halted.
- Changes in recreational interests. There is significant and growing interest in nature based activities such as walking, running and cycling (*Marsden Jacob 2016*). Bushwalking #8 in Ausport's latest Top 20 (hunting didn't rate) is a popular activity for tourists (*Tourism Research Australia Visitor surveys*). These activities are hampered by duck shooting occurring in the same vicinity.
- Duck shooter numbers are declining and now make up less than 0.38 of one percent of the population. Around half this tiny number are inactive.



- Rural economic pressure. Agriculture is becoming less reliable due to climate change and market price fluctuations. Manufacturing is similarly 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*). The solution is nature based tourism.

- Tourism contributes more to the Australian economy than agriculture (agriculture, forestry and fishing), employs 1 in 19 Australians and supports 1 in 8 businesses and for the fifth consecutive year, real growth in tourism GDP has outpaced national GDP growth (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).

Consider Gannawarra with its 14% structural unemployment rate and high take up of social security. The Kerang RAMSAR wetlands of international importance could be a tourism mecca providing much needed jobs and revenue if it weren't for duck shooting.

- Rural population increases require safety considerations and jobs. More people now live around waterways where shooting takes place. Aside from having the right to safe 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.

As rural communities have expanded, no consideration has been afforded those who live near waterways, of noise pollution or impacts to children, animals and livelihoods of duck shooting in close proximity.

Conclusion

Based on the significant continued long term decline of native waterbird indices, the hotter and drier environmental pressures set to continue and the inability to control duck shooting, the 2020 season must be closed.

This is notwithstanding the lack of risk assessments of the impacts to rural communities.

Thank you for allowing us to comment. We hope to see a sensible recommendation by GMA to close the 2020 season based on the overwhelming facts and evidence.

[Regional Victorians Opposed to Duck Shooting Inc.](#)

Regional Victorians Opposed to Duck Shooting Inc. are a not for profit association incorporated in April 2018. Now with over 4000 supporters, consisting largely of those who live or work around Victorian waterways and are directly adversely impacted by duck shooting, our purpose remains, to bring awareness of these impacts which have gone unrecognized, and to promote a better way for our waterways. [Click here](#) to see some of what rural people said.

References

- State of The World's Birds 2018
- GMA License Statistics & 2020 Season Considerations
- Victoria's Outdoor Economy Marsden Jacob 2016
- Tourism Research Australia last three years of Visitor Survey datab
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- Centre for Ecosystem Science Annual Aerial Waterbird Survey's
- The Arthur Rylah Institute Hunter Bag Surveys 2017, 2018 & 2019
- Ecosystems Across Australia are Collapsing under Climate Change – The Conversation 5/7/18
- Waterbirds at Risk as Irrigation Saps Floods in Murray Darling Wetlands –Sydney Morning Herald 4/7/18
- Sheer Speed of Global Warming Decimating Birds Say Scientists – Haaretz correspondent 23/7/18

“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

