



# Guidelines for humane dispatch of downed ducks



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# Introduction

Responsible duck hunting requires downed ducks to be immediately recovered and dispatched humanely. A downed duck is one that has been shot and brought down. The Wildlife (Game) Regulations 2012 state that hunters must make all reasonable attempts to immediately recover downed game birds that have been shot and recover at least the breast meat. On recovery the game birds must be immediately killed (i.e. dispatched).

There are a number of ways to humanely dispatch downed ducks. The methods in this guide are considered best practice and need to be carried out quickly to minimise pain and stress caused to the duck. Choose a method that you feel confident to perform, if in doubt practice on a dead duck. Always consider your safety and the safety of others when choosing a method.



# What is a humane method for dispatching a downed duck?

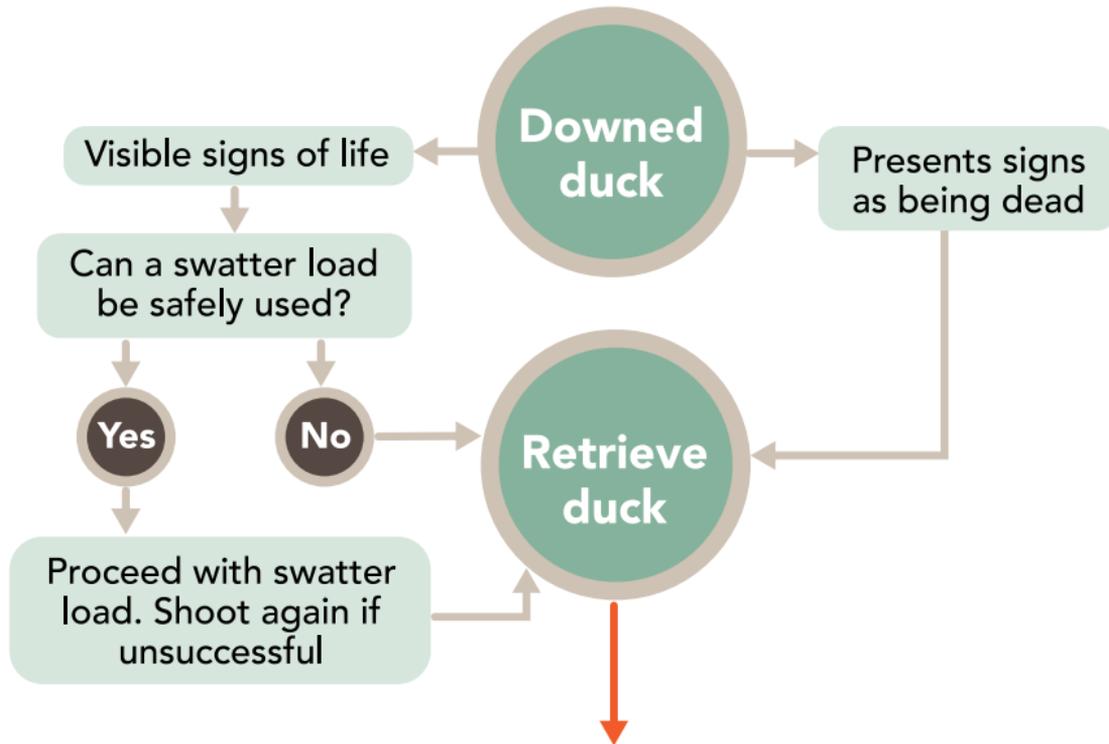
**Humane dispatch** results in instant death or irreversible loss of consciousness before causing the duck's death. Make sure that you:

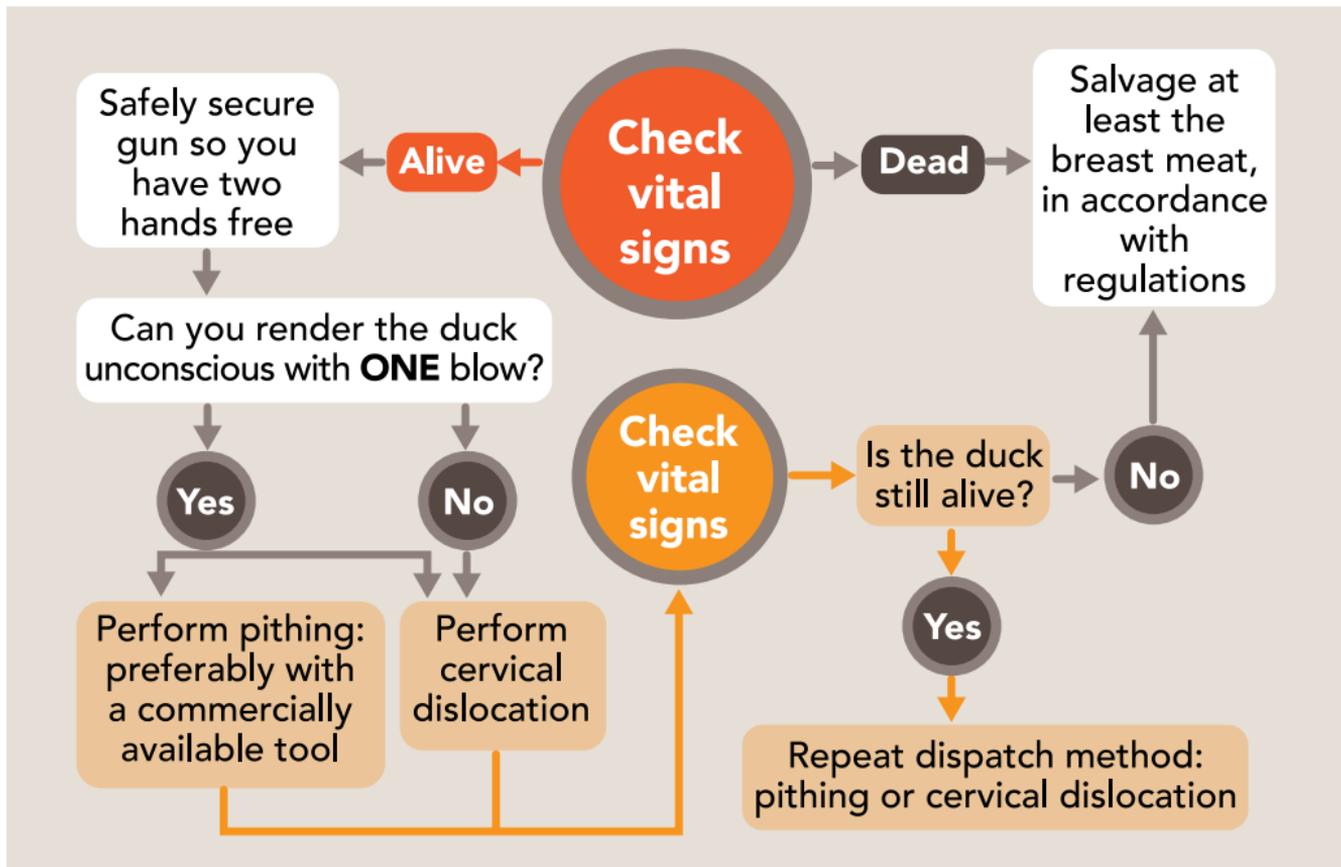
- Can carry out the method competently
- Render the duck unconscious where possible
- Cause the duck to die quickly without it regaining consciousness
- Confirm the duck is dead (see the "*Vital signs*" section)

## Steps involved in recovering and humanely dispatching a downed duck

The diagram on the next page 'Steps to humanely dispatch a downed duck' is an aid to assist you in deciding which method of dispatch is suitable, and when and how to check that the duck is dead.

# Steps to humanely dispatch a downed duck





## Swatter loads

Firing a swatter load (if it is safe to do so) is the quickest way to dispatch a downed duck. Swatter loads are shotshells with small shot sizes that produce a dense pattern. It is the preferred method to dispatch downed ducks and a hunter should always carry swatter loads while hunting.

Wounded ducks often sit low in the water and only a small amount of the vital areas are exposed (e.g. brain and spinal cord). The denser pattern of the swatter load is needed to ensure that the strike is fatal.

The typical shooting range for swatter loads is 20–30 m, with the most effective steel shot size #7 to #5. It is important that the barrel with the tightest choke is used to deliver the swatter load. This is typically the top barrel in an under/over shotgun.



### **Step 1 and 2. Loading swatter loads**

Firing a swatter load can be an effective method to quickly dispatch a downed duck.

Use #7 to #5 steel shot swatter loads.

Extreme caution must be used when using swatter loads and you must ensure that there are no other people, animals or assets in the firing line and be mindful of the potential for ricochet.

## Instructions

1. Check that it is safe to fire a swatter load
2. Load your shotgun with swatter loads and keep to within 30 m of the target where possible
3. Aim at the front half of the duck and where the duck's body meets the waterline
4. Fire a swatter load
5. If the duck is still alive (i.e. there is visible movement), fire a second swatter load
6. Recover the duck and confirm that it is dead by checking the vital signs or performing a "touch test" (see the "Vital signs" section)



### Step 2 and 3. Firing swatter loads

From no more than 30 metres away fire, aiming at the front half of the duck where its body meets the waterline.

## Two hands are needed to dispatch a downed duck

If a swatter load can't be used safely, there are other methods which can be used to dispatch a duck. These methods require you to have both hands free. One-handed techniques, such as 'windmilling' (swinging the duck by the neck around in an arc/circle), do not consistently result in unconsciousness or death – see more information about this on page 21.

Plan ahead and be prepared for how you will dispatch a duck with two hands free in field situations. Examples are:

- Use a sled or boat to store your firearm (see below)

- Before you start hunting, identify suitable places where you can place your firearm down safely and quickly
- Secure your firearm in the crook of your arm (see below)
- Attach a sling to your firearm so you can hang it over your shoulder or a tree limb

Always make sure that you handle your firearm safely by unloading it when not hunting, disengaging it (e.g. breaking the action open), pointing the muzzle in a safe direction and following the Firearms Safety Code ([www.firearmsafety.org.au](http://www.firearmsafety.org.au)).



### **Free your hands**

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If a swatter load cannot safely be used, you will need to consider other methods which require the use of two hands.



### **Secure your firearm**

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Disengage your firearm safely by breaking the action open and securing it (e.g. in the crook of your arm).

# Render the duck unconscious

A recovered duck that is still alive should be rendered unconscious before attempting to dispatch it. To achieve this, follow these steps:

## Instructions

1. Secure your firearm safely to ensure that both hands are free
2. Use a hard and heavy blunt instrument, such as a fishing priest or short length of metal pipe or rod. These are acceptable instruments to use and should be carried with you (see below)
3. Enough force must be applied to make the duck unconscious with ONE blow
4. The blow MUST land directly on top of the duck's skull. This can be delivered vertically or horizontally depending on how the duck is restrained (see below)
5. Make sure the duck has been rendered unconscious by checking the following signs:
  - lack of eye blinking
  - lack of muscle tension in the beak and neck
  - no controlled movement of the head
6. After checking for signs of unconsciousness, proceed with a secondary method to dispatch the duck (e.g. cervical dislocation or pithing).

**Blunt force trauma is ONLY humane if delivered with ONE blow**



#### **Step 1 to 4. Render the duck unconscious**

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A heavy blunt instrument such as a baton can be an effective method to quickly render the duck unconscious.

Ensure you use enough force when you swing and aim for the top of the duck's skull.

With a heavy blunt instrument, strike the duck on the top of the skull with a single blow to render it unconscious.

Sometimes, it is not always possible or appropriate to render a duck unconscious, including under the following circumstances:

- You are not capable of rendering the duck unconscious with ONE blow
- You don't have a heavy, blunt tool available
- The hunting environment is unsuitable e.g. hunting in very deep water and you are unable to deliver a blow effectively or safely

If you can't render the duck unconscious, cervical dislocation (NOT pithing) should be the only method used to dispatch the duck (see the "*Cervical dislocation*" section).

# Cervical dislocation

Cervical dislocation is the act of separating the skull from the neck or top of the spine. Doing so results in instant death and is a humane way to dispatch a duck. The following instructions step you through the process.

## Instructions

1. Secure your firearm safely to ensure both hands are free
2. It is preferred to render the duck unconscious with ONE blow first before proceeding with cervical dislocation (see the "Render the duck unconscious" section). If this is not possible, proceed straight to cervical dislocation

**Duck welfare is not compromised if the head is removed during cervical dislocation**



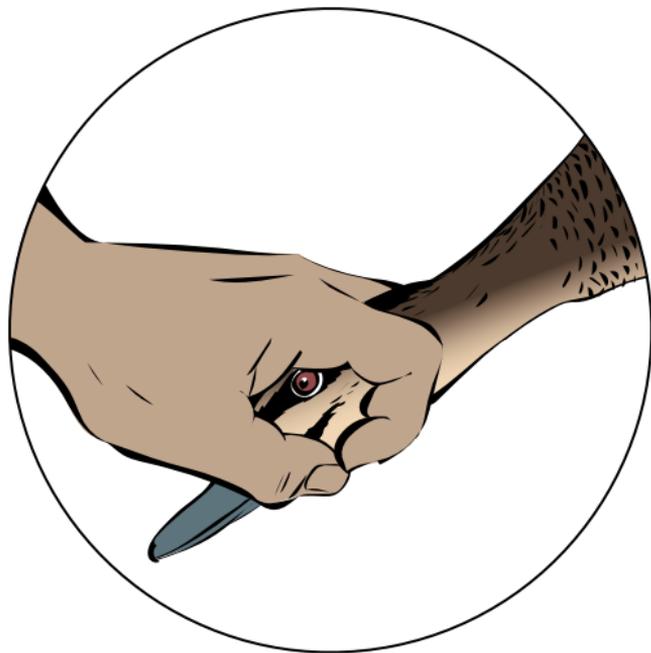
### Step 3. Cervical dislocation

Secure the duck firmly by holding the duck's legs above the hock in one hand and the duck's head in the other.

3. For good control, hold the duck with a firm grip with both hands. Hold the duck's legs just above the hocks (joint on the leg where the feathers meet) in one hand. Position the underside of the duck's body towards yours and secure the duck firmly close to your body, between hip and chest height (see above)

Depending on the size of the duck you can adjust the grip. For a small bird such as a Pink-eared Duck, hold the duck firmly around the abdomen just above the hocks. For larger ducks such as Mountain Duck, hold the duck near the top of the wing

4. With the other hand, grip the duck's head firmly (around the wider part of the skull near the ears) between your first two fingers and place your thumb under the bill

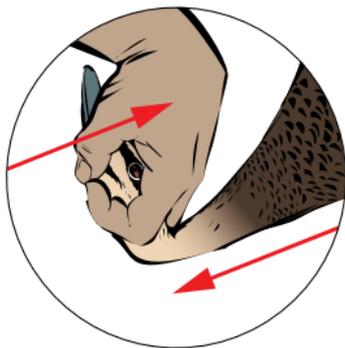


#### **Step 4. Holding the duck**

Use one hand to grip the duck's head firmly between your first two fingers and place your thumb under its bill.

**Wing flapping and other strong muscular movements can occur after cervical dislocation**

5. Position the duck's head bending backwards until it is almost at 90 degrees to its neck
6. With each hand, apply increasing force in opposite directions, stretching neck downwards and the legs upwards at the same time pulling the head back towards the neck. This should be performed in a firm, single, swift motion until you feel the skull separate from the neck



### **Step 5. Position the head**

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Position the duck's head backwards until it is almost 90 degrees to its neck.

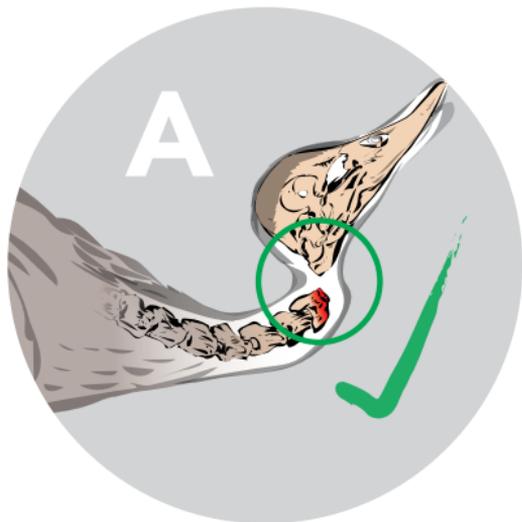


### **Step 6. Apply force**

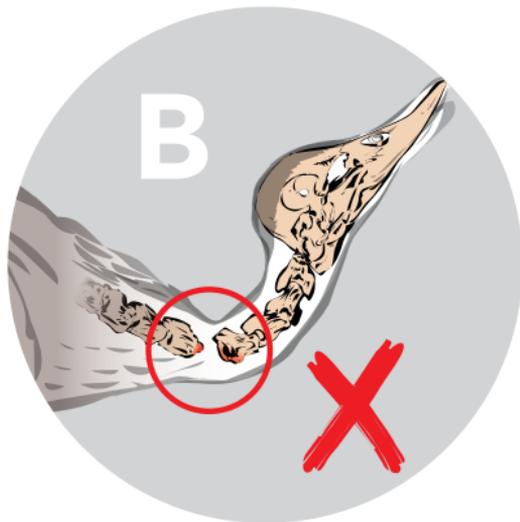
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In one quick motion, apply increasing force, stretching the neck downwards and the legs upwards while pulling the head back towards the neck.

7. Using your thumb and forefinger, feel along the neck up towards the base of the skull for a clear separation between the neck bones and the skull. If you can't feel this separation or gap, immediately repeat the procedure



8. Confirm that the duck is dead by checking the vital signs or performing a "touch test" (see the "Vital signs" section)



### Step 7. Separate the skull from the neck

A: When performed correctly, you should be able to feel the separation of the neck from the skull.

B: If performed incorrectly, the neck will still be attached to the skull.

## Pithing

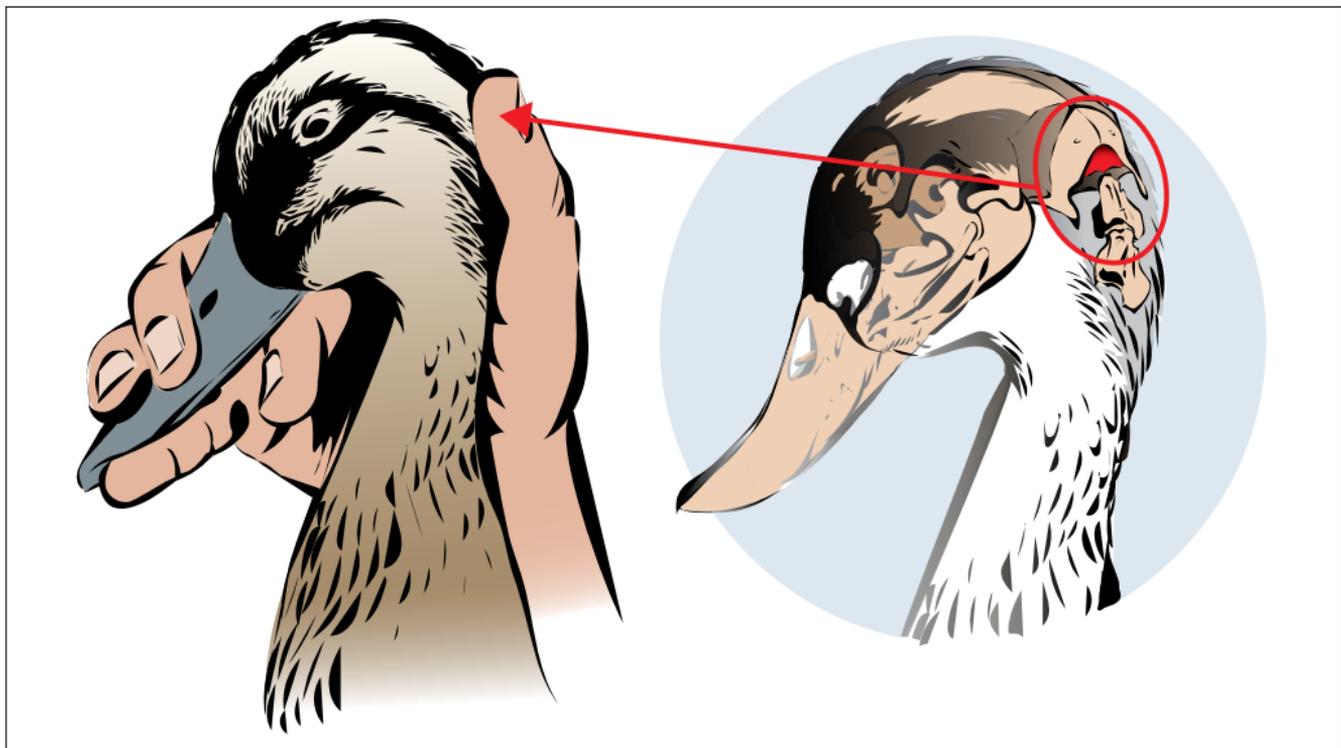
Pithing (inserting a sharp, thick needle or metal probe into the brain) should **ONLY** be performed when the duck has been rendered unconscious. Pithing is carried out by using a spiked pithing tool, which is inserted through the soft spot/dip at the back of the head and then into the base of the brain, to ensure brain destruction.



**Commercially available pithing tool**

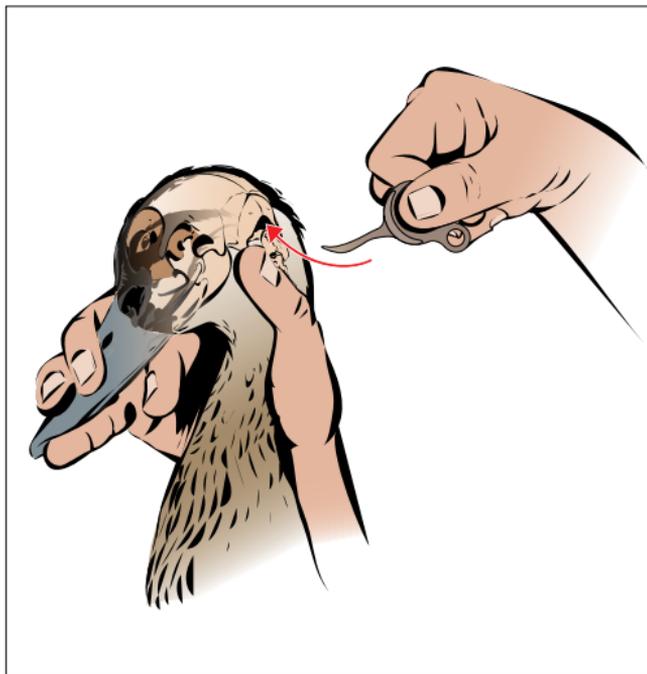
## Instructions

1. Secure your firearm safely to ensure both hands are free
2. The duck MUST be rendered unconscious before performing pithing (see the "*Render the duck unconscious*" section)
3. Secure the duck firmly by holding the duck's bill with two fingers and placing your thumb at the back of the head (see page 17)
4. Use your thumb to find the soft spot/dip at the back of the head. The soft spot is the gap between the base of the skull and where the neck enters the skull (see page 17)
5. With the pithing tool, pierce the skin through the soft spot
6. Push the tool into the head, angling it upwards towards the top of the skull. This allows the tool to hit the brain and not go forward towards the eye (see page 18)
7. After the tool is in the correct position, twist it around a few times to ensure the brain is destroyed (see page 18)
8. If you are using a commercially available product, make sure you follow the manufacturer's instructions for correct use
9. Confirm that the duck is dead by checking the vital signs or performing a "touch test" (see the "*Vital signs*" section)



### **Step 3 and 4. Pithing**

Secure the duck firmly and find the soft spot/dip on the back of the duck's head.



### **Step 5. Insert the pithing tool**

Pierce the skin through the soft spot at the base of the skull.



### **Step 6 and 7. Destroy the brain**

Insert the tool at an angle towards the top of the skull and twist around a few times to ensure brain destruction.

## Vital signs

After performing a dispatch method or bringing a downed duck to hand, you must confirm that the duck is dead before continuing to hunt.

Confirm the duck is dead by checking for these signs:

- The eyelids and eye membranes of the duck don't close
- The duck's body and neck are limp, there is no movement and the wings are drooping (see below)
- The eyes are glazed
- The duck is not breathing and has no heartbeat

If you are unsure if the duck is dead, perform a "touch test". Place one finger on the duck's eyeball. Wait to see if the duck blinks. If the duck does not blink, then this is a sign the duck is dead (see below).



### **Confirm with the touch test**

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Place one finger on the duck's eyeball. If the duck does not blink, it is dead.



### **Check vital signs**

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Ensure the duck is dead by checking that the duck's body and neck are limp, the wings are drooping and there is no breathing or heartbeat.

## 'Windmilling' and unacceptable methods of dispatch

'Windmilling' or swinging the duck by the neck around in an arc/circle, is a common dispatch method used by duck hunters. However, many hunters cannot perform this method in a way that consistently causes immediate unconsciousness and death. This results in the neck still being attached to the skull (see page 14) and the duck is not immediately killed as required by the regulations. Therefore, this technique is NOT recommended.

### Unacceptable methods to dispatch downed ducks include:

- Drowning
- Suffocation
- Rib compression (thoracic compression)
- Hitting a duck's head against an object

# Being an effective and responsible duck hunter

All hunters should aim to harvest ducks cleanly (i.e. with one shot) to prevent wounding. Knowing your skill level and having a good understanding of the basics will help to achieve this. It's important to:

- Use the right load and choke combination for the ducks you are targeting and your hunting situation
- Attract ducks within, and not shoot beyond, your maximum shooting skills distance (25 to 30 m is the maximum distance for most hunters)

- Isolate a single duck and don't shoot into flocks
- Hit the duck in the front half of the body (vital area) and
- Have an effective retrieval strategy

Doing this and practicing regularly will reduce the risk of wounding and losing ducks, and improve animal welfare.

## Victoria's Shotgunning Education Program

The Game Management Authority (GMA) in partnership with Field & Game Australia (FGA) and the Sporting Shooters Association of Australia (Vic) (SSAA) have developed educational materials and practical sessions to ensure effective and efficient hunting of game birds, including ducks.



The Shotgunning Education Program's *Be a Better Game Bird Hunter Handbook* contains important information on understanding your basic skill level, practising properly, using the correct equipment, shooting within your maximum shooting skills distance, distance estimation and retrieval strategies.

FGA and SSAA also run a practical field training day called the *Gamebird Hunting Essentials Masterclass* where hunters can learn the fundamental skills of shotgunning for game birds to help you become a more skilled and successful hunter. The GMA strongly encourages you to read this information and attend a Masterclass to ensure you have the correct knowledge and skills to be a responsible and effective duck hunter.

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