



Equus caballus

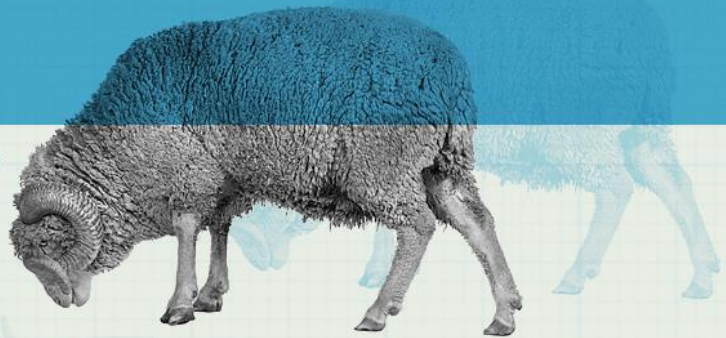


Bos taurus

Duck hunting season 2021

RSPCA Victoria submission

06.01.2021



Ovis aries



Canis lupus familiaris



Felis catus

Introduction

RSPCA Victoria appreciates the opportunity to provide a submission to the Game Management Authority (GMA) on our suggestions for modifications to the 2021 duck hunting season. In this submission we will outline the reasons we believe the 2021 season should be cancelled.

National RSPCA policy

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

RSPCA Australia is opposed to open seasons on duck, quail, deer and other 'game' species, and to the breeding and release of animals into 'game parks' for the purpose of hunting for sport.

Duck welfare

A study by Clausen et al (2017) that compared crippling rates in pink-footed geese in Denmark before and after an awareness campaign started which aimed to reduce crippling rates, strongly suggested a positive effect of the campaign. RSPCA Victoria has long shared our concerns that currently in Victoria the wounding rate of ducks is unknown, and whilst duck hunting remains lawful, no interventions have been put in place in order to reduce the wounding rate. We were pleased to hear recently that the GMA is planning on undertaking research to determine the wounding rates of ducks and believe that interventions to reduce wounding must also be developed.

The study by Clausen et al found that the crippling rate showed a declining trend from 36% to 20%. As Victoria has not implemented any interventions to reduce wounding rates of ducks, we would assume that the wounding rate would continue to be very high, similar to the original wounding rate in Denmark. From the 1950s to the 1980s, some surveys of water bird wounding losses in Australia were undertaken, but no recent studies have been conducted. A study by Norman and Powell (1981) which 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 retrieved. Duck hunting also results in a significant number of surviving ducks with shotgun pellets embedded in their body. An x-ray study by Norman (1976) of trapped live ducks (of mixed species) in Victoria from 1957 to 1973 reported that between 6% and 19% of ducks had embedded shot.

It is indisputable that duck hunting using a shotgun results in a substantial number of ducks being wounded, with some individuals surviving, whilst others will suffer before eventually dying. Until evidence to the contrary is provided, it appears that based on the above Australian studies, approximately 26% of birds shot will be

wounded or maimed/crippled. Of these, approximately 12% will be wounded and survive, and approximately 14% will be maimed/crippled but this could be as high as 33%. The likely outcome for wounded, maimed or crippled birds is a slow and painful death.

Using a wounding rate of 26% and comparing this to the reported total harvest figure of 238,666 from the 2019 season (as the 2020 season was impacted by COVID-19), this would mean that over 62,000 ducks were wounded and not killed outright in the 2019 season. This amount of wounding is unacceptably high and needs to be reduced as a matter of urgency.

Increasing range has been shown to increase wounding of birds and therefore a reduction in range reduces the shots that will have a low probability of killing but a high risk of wounding. A study by Noer et al (2007) found that wounding rates could be reduced by requiring compliance with a 25m maximum range for shooting geese in Denmark.

We were very concerned to note that in the GMA's Summary report of hunters' knowledge survey findings that only 37% of duck hunters could answer questions correctly that related to minimising wounding. We were also concerned to see that 87% of respondents could not correctly answer questions on how to dispatch downed ducks. This is especially troubling considering the GMA developed Guidelines for the humane dispatch of downed ducks. We therefore recommend that the GMA investigates ways to more effectively educate hunters on these issues.

We continue to have concerns that the Shotgunning Education Program (SEP) is voluntary and that there is a cost to participate. In addition, we are equally concerned that the Waterfowl Identification Test (WIT) only needs to be taken as a once off. According to the GMA's Summary report of hunters' knowledge survey findings, only one in five respondents were able to correctly answer questions identifying game species of duck with 80% of respondents unable to correctly answer the questions. This reinforces the importance of introducing an annual WIT for hunters. While duck hunting continues to be legal in Victoria, at a minimum the SEP should be made mandatory and regular WITs should be undertaken to reduce the risk of shooters killing incorrect species including those that are vulnerable.

RSPCA Victoria recommendations:

RSPCA Victoria strongly recommends cancelling the 2021 season due to the inevitable suffering of native ducks.

Given the results of the hunters' knowledge survey, until such time that it can be demonstrated that overall knowledge has improved, no duck hunting season should be permitted.

Acknowledging that duck hunting is currently lawful, if it is to continue, RSPCA Victoria has the following recommendations to reduce the negative welfare impacts for ducks and off-target species:

1. Determine the wounding rates of ducks in Victoria
2. Implement interventions to reduce the wounding rate (i.e. regulate a maximum shooting distance)
3. Improve hunter education on issues such as humanely dispatching downed ducks
4. Make the Shotgunning Education program mandatory
5. Introduce an annual waterfowl identification test

Climate outlook

Current climactic conditions as well as the forecasted conditions from January to March will not support sustainable hunting. While the outlooks indicate wetter than average conditions, southern parts of Australia are entering into their drier season, so rainfall is not likely to be sufficient to relieve long-term rainfall deficits (BoM Climate Outlook). Low and near-median streamflows are likely in Victoria throughout December to February (BoM Climate Outlook).

The average maximum temperature for December to February is likely to be higher than the long-term average for Victoria and adjacent parts of SA and NSW, Tasmania, the far west of WA, the northern coastlines of the NT and Queensland, and around the eastern part of the NSW/Queensland border. The average minimum temperature is very likely (greater than 80% chance) to be higher than the long-term average across Australia during December to February, apart from around southeast WA where there is a closer to 60% chance (BoM Climate Outlook).

In 2020, Australia's average maximum temperature from January to November was the fifth warmest on record with maximum temperatures very much above average across most of Australia (BoM Australia's Climate). In addition, across Australia as a whole rainfall was 7 per cent below average (BoM Australia's Climate). While major water storage levels in the Murray-Darling Basin have witnessed some recovery in 2020, they remain low across most of the northern basin (BoM Australia's Climate). Water storage levels in the northern Basin reached the record low of 5.4% of combined capacity in mid-January 2020 this was 7.5% lower than any point during the millennium drought (Porter et al. 2020).

As acknowledged by the GMA, the Murray-Darling Basin is a critical area for waterbird breeding. While water storage levels have experienced an increase, this is not sufficient to promote sustainable waterbird populations.

RSPCA Victoria recommendation:

As predicted rainfall will not relieve long-term deficits and subsequently influence streamflow and habitat conditions, the 2021 duck hunting season should be cancelled.

Game bird abundance

RSPCA Victoria continues to be concerned by the data provided in the Aerial Survey of Wetland Birds in Eastern Australia each year, which demonstrates the dire conditions that wetland birds are facing. Specifically, we are concerned to note:

- Total waterbird abundance in 2020 has decreased from 2019 and remains well below average.
- Breeding abundance and breeding species richness has decreased considerably in 2020 when compared with the previous year.
- Breeding species richness was extremely low with only 3 species recorded breeding - this was the sixth lowest on record and black swans comprised 81% of all records.
- All game species abundances were well below long term averages, in some cases by an order of magnitude with 5 out of 8 game species showing significant long-term declines. In particular, the Grey teal has declined significantly since 2019.

- Four of the five species that together made up 92% of game species harvested in 2020; the Pacific Black Duck, Australian Wood Duck, Grey Teal and Mountain Duck continue to show long term declines in their abundance.
- Waterbird indices across river basins are reflective of low levels of available habitat and drought intensity over the previous 4 years. Overall abundance, breeding index and breeding species richness are related to available habitat. The lack of available habitat, while slightly improved from 2019 which was the lowest on record, leads to declines in waterbird abundance, breeding and breeding species richness.

We are very concerned to note that while there has been a small increase in available habitat (i.e. in the Murray Darling Basin) we have continued to see a decline in game duck abundance. This is in direct contrast to what has until now been the understanding, as outlined in the GMA considerations document, where habitat availability and game duck abundance have a positive relationship. While there is no explanation as to why this could be the case, we know that there is a long history of dry conditions possibly exacerbated following the 2019/20 bushfires. It is not clear if this is an aberration or the beginning of a crisis in native duck populations. Until this is properly understood, we do not believe that a 2021 duck hunting season should go ahead as this is likely to increase pressure on a population that at this stage seems unable to rebound with improving habitat.

Based on the data in the Aerial survey of Wetland Birds we believe that it is not possible to undertake a sustainable hunting season in 2021.

RSPCA Victoria recommendation:

Due to the long-term declines in game bird abundance which have not recovered with increased habitat, the 2021 duck hunting season should be cancelled.

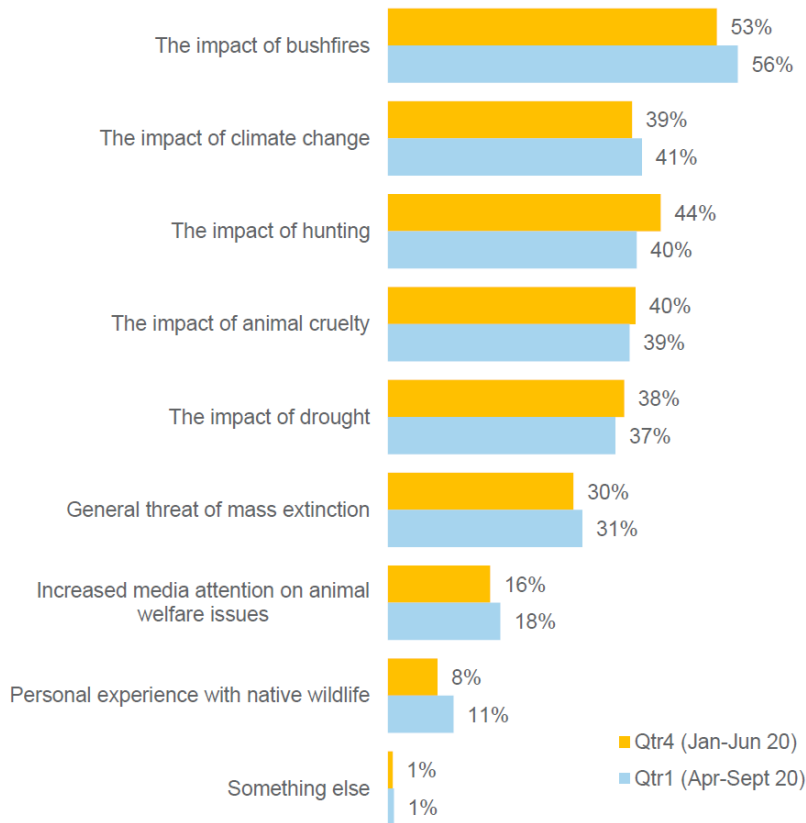
Victorians' attitudes towards ducks

From January to September 2020, RSPCA Victoria engaged market research firm Kantar to undertake a survey and analysis of Victorians' attitudes to duck welfare. This survey was part of a larger RSPCA Victoria brand-tracking survey that is regularly conducted with data collected from a representative sample of 3,683 Victorian respondents across the two periods of surveying.

When asked about their concern for native wildlife 84% of respondents stated they were concerned about native wildlife. Participants had either become increasingly

concerned or were always concerned about native wildlife. Of those who stated they have become increasingly concerned for native wildlife, two in five were concerned due to the impact of hunting (40%), climate change (41%) and drought (37%). This remained relatively unchanged across the two periods of surveying demonstrating consistent concern among the Victorian community for native wildlife.

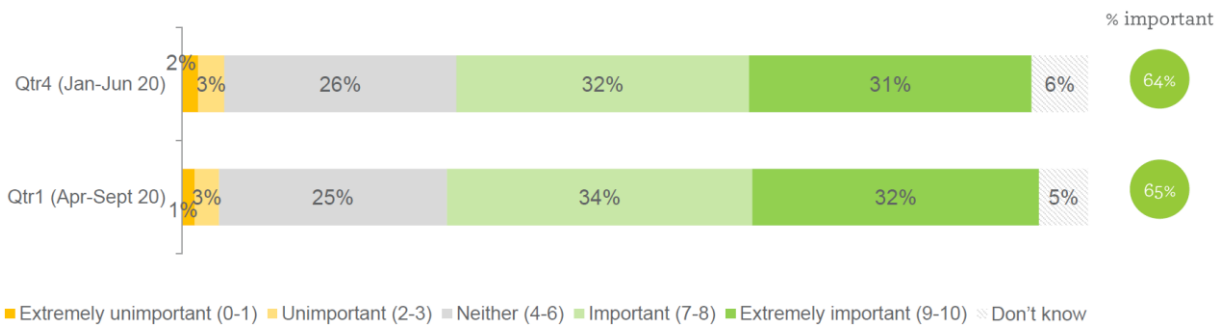
Reasons for increased concern for native wildlife



* Please note, the above graph refers to survey quarters. These take place over six month periods.

Two in three (65%) Victorians consider native duck welfare to be important. This similarly remained unchanged across the two periods of surveying.

Personal importance of native duck welfare



Furthermore, over the two periods of surveying, 1,219 Victorians were asked to describe in their own words what they considered to endanger the lives of native ducks. Duck hunting arose as a common theme among participants with 49% of people mentioning shooting, hunting or people killing ducks as something they were concerned about. Some qualitative examples of this include:

“Hunting (shooting), predators, people feeding bread, pollution”
- Female, 35-44, Metro

“Duck hunting season and natural predators.”
- Female, 55-64, Regional

“Loss of habitat, feral animals, indiscriminate hunting”
- Male, 65+, Metro

“Wetlands and habitat destruction, pollution, feral cats, dogs, duck hunting.”
- Male, 55-64, Metro

“People shooting them and animals that hunt them like foxes”
- Female, 45-54, Metro

“People, foxes the duck shooting fraternity”
- Male, 65+, Regional

RSPCA Victoria recommendation:

Due to community concern for the welfare of native ducks, combined with data on species abundance, climate outlook, habitat conditions and the results of the hunters' knowledge survey a 2021 duck hunting season would not be consistent with community expectations and therefore should be cancelled.

References

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