
RE: 2021 DUCK SEASON ARRANGEMENTS

Core message

Under the *Game Management Authority Act 2014* (the GMA Act), the Game Management Authority (GMA) may make recommendations to relevant Ministers in relation to open and closed seasons and bag limits for game hunting. The objectives of GMA are to promote sustainability and responsibility in game hunting and also have regard to the GMA Act's Guiding Principles that include an evidence-based approach and triple bottom-line assessments.

The Bureau of Meteorology (BOM) is predicting a favourable climatic outlook for above average rainfall for the next three months. The 2020 Eastern Australian Waterbird Survey (EAWS) indicated that although there had been some improvement in Victorian wetland availability, total eastern Australian game duck abundance is below the long-term average and has declined from last year. Large-scale breeding activity continues to be suppressed for a fourth year especially for the more nomadic species such as Grey Teal where remaining birds may constitute core breeding stock. In light of the decline in game duck abundance, a lack of breeding and below average wetland availability reported in the EAWS, the GMA Board considers it is necessary to significantly modify the 2021 duck season beyond the reductions made for the 2020 duck season. This is to ensure that hunting remains sustainable and allows duck populations to recover when environmental conditions improve. A reduced season will still provide some economic benefit to regional areas and social benefits for hunters.

The GMA Board recommends the modified 2021 duck season is as follows:

- the daily bag limit should be reduced to two (2) birds
- the season should be reduced to approximately three (3) weeks (20 days), commencing on Wednesday 26 May and ending on Monday 14 June 2021, inclusive
- Grey Teal and Chestnut Teal should be prohibited from hunting north of the Princes Highway/Freeway
- hunting start times should be delayed to 08:00 am across the State from Wednesday 26 May – Sunday 30 May, inclusive
- the Blue-winged Shoveler should again be prohibited from hunting given the concern over the species' status.

I would be pleased to meet with you to discuss this briefing, should that be helpful.

Due	As soon as possible
Explanation	To allow industry, the hunting community and government agencies to make arrangements.

Recommendation

That you:

1. Approve the GMA recommendation to modify the 2021 duck season by reducing the daily bag limit to two birds, reducing the season length to 20 days, commencing on 26 May and closing on 14 June 2021, prohibiting the hunting of Grey Teal and Chestnut Teal north of the Princes Highway/Freeway, delaying hunting start times to 8:00am across the State from 26 – 30 May inclusive, and again prohibiting the hunting of Blue-winged Shoveler.
2. Note that if this recommendation is accepted, GMA will inform the community on the changes and conduct compliance operations together with its partner agencies.

Recommendation 1	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Approved	<input type="checkbox"/> Not approved	<input type="checkbox"/> Noted	<input type="checkbox"/> Returned for review
Recommendation 2	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Approved	<input type="checkbox"/> Not approved	<input type="checkbox"/> Noted	<input type="checkbox"/> Returned for review

To: **Minister for Agriculture**



Minister's Comments

Removed

Signed

Mary-Anne Thomas MP
Minister for Agriculture

Date

4 February 2021

Approved by

Removed

Date

25 January 2021

Brian Hine, Chair Game Management Authority [REDACTED]

Endorsed by: **Graeme Ford, CEO Game Management Authority** [REDACTED]

Prepared by: [REDACTED]

From	GAME MANAGEMENT AUTHORITY	Ref
Title	2021 DUCK SEASON ARRANGEMENTS	File
		Due

1. Key Information

Sustainable duck hunting in Victoria

To ensure that duck hunting remains sustainable, evidence-based decision-making is essential and a number of environmental and game duck population variables are monitored and reviewed annually. These include the abundance, distribution and extent of breeding of game ducks, the distribution and extent of waterfowl habitat and the current and forecast climatic conditions affecting waterfowl populations. All of eastern Australia, and not just Victoria, is taken into account in recognition of the highly mobile nature of many game duck species and their ability to move large distances in short periods of time.

Summary of conditions

The document *Considerations for the 2021 Duck Season as at 15 December 2020* (see **Attachment 1**) provides detailed information relating to the status of game duck populations and their habitats across eastern Australia.

Habitat availability

Eastern Australia experienced severe drought conditions between 2017 – 2019. This had a negative impact on the health of wetlands and waterways and consequently, waterbird populations, including game ducks. Most of Australia has received average to below average rainfall in 2020 and there has been some partial recovery of the prolonged rainfall deficiencies. Despite reaching La Nina thresholds and high rainfall events in some locations, widespread above average rainfall has failed to eventuate across eastern Australia in 2020. Soil moisture levels are reducing with the dry winter, and summer temperatures, resulting in limited inflows into wetlands and waterways. As a result, waterbird habitat has increased marginally in 2020. The EAWS wetland area index (see **Attachment 2**) has increased marginally from the lowest recorded in 38 years in 2019 (31% of the long-term average) to the 5th lowest recorded and is at 42% of the long-term average.

Distribution of habitat

Habitat is greatest in northern Victoria to northern NSW (EAWS bands 2 – 5) and north Queensland (band 10) (see **Attachment 1**). 48% of wetlands surveyed in the EAWS (including dry wetlands) held no waterbirds.

Game duck abundance and distribution

The EAWS game duck abundance index decreased by 23% from the previous year to the 7th lowest recorded in 38 years and is 44% of the long-term average. The abundance indexes for all eight Victorian game species was below the long-term average, however, the indexes for Black Duck, Chestnut Teal, Hardhead, Mountain Duck and Pink-eared Duck increased somewhat from the previous year.

Five of the eight game duck species show significant long-term declines. Of particular concern is the marked reduction in a usually common and widespread game species, the Grey Teal. Its abundance is currently at 27% of the long-term EAWS average and is displaying an almost 50% decline in the last two decades from the previous two. South Australian data also shows the species is at 11% of the long-term average in surveyed parts of that state.

All sources of institution-provided data obtained by the GMA, including from the NSW and South Australian governments, showed that game duck abundance in eastern Australia or parts were lower than long-term averages and indicate that four years of rainfall deficiencies and reduced breeding have caused declines in the game duck population.

Waterbirds are more widely dispersed than last year and less concentrated, reflecting an increase in habitat availability in the Murray-Darling Basin. Game ducks were most abundant in northern NSW (band 5) and northern Queensland (band 10).

Most game duck species will not breed on a large scale when conditions are poor and not conducive to successfully rearing young. The EAWS breeding index recorded little incidence of waterbird breeding and what was recorded was dominated by a non-game species. With the exception of 2016, there has been little large-scale waterbird breeding since 2012 and the existing populations of game ducks constitute core breeding stock.

Climate outlook

La Nina thresholds have been reached and the seasonal climate outlook is for a wetter than average January – March period for 2021. The BOM however advises that persistent, widespread, above average rainfall is needed to lift areas out of deficiency at annual and longer timescales and provide relief from the impacts of the long period of low rainfall.

Long-term trends

Waterbird (including game duck) abundance, habitat availability, breeding and breeding species richness are all showing long-term declines. While this is driven mainly by river regulation and a drying climate, hunting during periods when there is little recruitment removes breeding adults which can negatively affect subsequent recruitment.

Duck hunting arrangements in adjacent states

South Australia

The South Australian government declared its duck season on 14 January 2021, three days after the GMA board determined the recommendations contained in this briefing. It is a restricted season, reduced by approximately one month in length with the daily bag limit reduced by two-thirds from the regulated season. However the season length has been increased from 9 weeks in 2020 to 14 weeks in 2021. Three game species have been prohibited from hunting due to low abundance. The season will run from 20 March – 27 June, inclusive, and the bag limit is four (4) birds per day, the same as the 2020 season (normally 12). South Australia experiences significantly lower hunting pressure than Victoria, with approximately 1,700 licensed duck hunters compared with Victoria's 25,000.

New South Wales

New South Wales banned recreational duck hunting in 1995. However, it does conduct a damage mitigation program to protect rice and other crops. The NSW 2020-21 duck cull quota applies to this rice growing season and is set at 46,304 birds. This is approximately 15% up from last year (39,732) but only 37% of the quota in 2016-17 when bird numbers at their recent highest and 63% of the six-year average.

Tasmania

Tasmania is yet to confirm its seasonal arrangements for 2021. Provisional season dates have been published (6/3/2021 – 6/6/2021), however, these are yet to be confirmed by the responsible Minister. Bag limits have not yet been set.

Requirements of the Game Management Authority

Section 8A of the GMA Act requires the GMA to have regard to the following Guiding Principles when exercising its powers or performing its functions:

- integrated decision making
- triple bottom-line assessment, which means an assessment of all the economic, social and environmental costs and benefits, taking into account externalities
- equity between persons and generations
- evidence-based approach, which means considering the best available information when making decisions
- stakeholder engagement and community participation
- transparency.

Game Management Authority recommendation

The GMA considers that implementing hunting arrangements as prescribed under the Wildlife (Game) Regulations 2012 presents an unacceptable risk to game species' sustainability. Ongoing low abundance, habitat availability and breeding indicated in the EAWS are of concern. Above average rainfall associated with the current La Nina has occurred in parts of the Eastern States and the Murray Darling Basin, however widespread flooding and over-bank flows necessary to fill wetlands and drive large breeding events has not materialised to date.

If hunting proceeds under normal seasonal arrangements and habitat improvements do not occur, the impact of removing potentially hundreds of thousands of birds from the population may delay recovery when conditions do improve, or exacerbate the population declines if another poor spring breeding event occurs.

The GMA recommended a reduced duck season for 2020, with a three-bird daily bag limit (normally 10), a 38-day season length (normally 87) and a prohibition on hunting the Blue-winged Shoveler. Given the prevailing conditions, it is considered that further reductions are required to ensure that duck hunting remains sustainable. Accordingly, the GMA recommends the following arrangements for the 2021 duck season. These include substantial modifications which will significantly reduce the total seasonal harvest, provide protection to the vulnerable Blue-winged Shoveler and reduce the impact on Grey Teal, while still allowing some economic benefits to regional economies and social benefits to hunters.

Daily bag limit and hunted species

The GMA recommends that the daily bag limit of game ducks should be reduced to two (2) birds per day.

In response to concern over the reduction in abundance of Grey Teal and its inability to recover due to a persistent lack of habitat, particularly in the key production area of the Murray-Darling Basin, the GMA believes that a level of protection should be afforded to the species by temporarily prohibiting hunting for the 2021 duck season. However, given the difficulty in differentiating the species from female Chestnut Teal (the Chestnut Teal is predominantly found in coastal areas), it is recommended to allow Grey Teal to be hunted south of the Princes Highway/Freeway only which will allow Chestnut Teal to be hunted in those coastal areas which are its stronghold. These coastal areas are not favoured breeding areas for Grey Teal and losses in these areas will be low compared with the usual level of harvest. The hunting of Grey and Chestnut Teal should be prohibited north of the Princes Highway/Freeway.

The Blue-winged Shoveler should also be prohibited from hunting in 2021 due to ongoing concern over the species' conservation status. The shoveler has not been hunted in Victoria since 2016 for this reason.

Season length and start times

The season length should be reduced from 12 weeks (87 days) to approximately three weeks (20 days), with a mid-week opening to diffuse hunting pressure and safety concerns associated with the opening weekend, commencing on Wednesday 26 May and ending on the usual second Monday in June (14 June for 2021). Holding the season in the back half is preferred by hunting groups if there is to be modification.

As per its previous advice to the former Minister for Agriculture on the trial of later start times over the opening weekend, the GMA believes that hunting start times should be delayed until 8:00am from Wednesday 26 May to Sunday 30 May, inclusive.

The GMA believes these restrictions will reduce the average seasonal harvest by approximately 88%.

Each season, there is usually a need to close wetlands to provide protection to non-game species that can be misidentified as game or provide refuge to protect significant numbers of rare and threatened waterbird species from duck hunting. Wetlands will be regularly monitored and any recommendations for closure or further regulation will be made to you in due course as required.

Social and economic impact

An economic review conducted by the Department of Jobs, Precincts and Regions (DJPR) into the 2019 Victorian hunting seasons found that duck hunting generated approximately \$65 million in direct and flow-on economic activity in that year, the majority of which is spent in rural and regional areas. Assuming 2% annual growth, this figure would translate to \$67.63 million in 2021.

If the 2021 season was modified as recommended, a portion of that sum would not be spent on actively hunting ducks in regional Victoria, including goods and services providers which are recovering from the impacts of the 2019 drought and bushfires and 2020 COVID-19 travel and trading restrictions.

The 2019 study showed that 96% of hunters undertake other substitutable outdoor recreational activities. 79% and 60% of hunters reportedly went camping and target shooting, respectively. Other activities, fishing (54%) and 4WD (53%) were also popular.

Data gathered and published by the GMA (harvest estimates) since 2009 indicates that hunter participation is not significantly reduced in modified seasons. The average days hunted during the season by hunters is approximately 3.7 days. However, if the GMA's recommendation is adopted, the 20-day season length would be the shortest since 1966. While the extent of the impact on hunter participation of such a short season is unknown, it is likely that there would be a reduction and expenditure associated with participation would be reduced.

Other spending not involved in actively hunting will also be reduced. The expected expenditure figure of \$67.63 million would be reduced, impacting on businesses and retailers involved in supplying goods and services to duck hunters. Despite this, some economic benefits associated with participation would still be realised even if a shortened season was held. Economic benefit would flow to those areas where substitutable activities are undertaken, however, there would be distributional effects in that any expenditure is unlikely to perfectly align with areas where duck hunting takes place.

The social benefits enjoyed by hunters (e.g. spending time outdoors and with friends and family and the physical and mental well-being benefits) would not be experienced to the same extent if there was a longer season. Nonetheless, the proposed season of 20 days does include three weekends (including the three-day Queen's birthday long weekend).

Those who oppose or who are negatively impacted by duck hunting would benefit from the reduced harvest and season length. The reduced season length would reduce the impact on amenity and competition for the use of public lands where hunting occurs. The economic impact of these factors is not known.

Adaptive Harvest Management

Implementation of the Waterfowl Conservation Harvest Model, a key action under the government's *Sustainable Hunting Action Plan*, will provide a robust, evidence-based and defensible approach to setting game duck harvest arrangements while gathering vital information on game duck population dynamics. With funding from government, the GMA commissioned the design of a robust monitoring program and trialed it in Victoria with the use of helicopters to survey 633 wetlands in November last year. Data is still being analysed and therefore GMA does not have the benefits of this data at the time of this briefing. GMA has engaged the Arthur Rylah Institute for Environmental Research (DELWP) to conduct a project titled *Abundance and Distribution of Game Duck Species in Victoria: Evaluation and Results from Aerial Surveys*. Products include a complete report on abundance estimates and advice on seasonal arrangements and a complete report on survey evaluation and model predictivity that is due for delivery by 31 March 2021.

While some community groups oppose duck hunting, if it is to continue, stakeholders agree there is a need for a more evidence-based approach. GMA strongly agrees.

2. Context

Duck hunting in Victoria

Duck hunting is permitted under the *Wildlife Act 1975*. The season length, species composition, bag limits and hunting methods are prescribed under the *Wildlife (Game) Regulations 2012*. Under these regulations, a duck hunting season occurs annually, commencing on the third Saturday in March and concluding on the second Monday in June. Eight duck species may be hunted, and the daily bag limit is set at ten game ducks per day, which includes a maximum of two Blue-winged Shoveler.

There are approximately 25,000 licensed duck hunters who on average harvest an estimated 347,160 game ducks annually.

Modifying a duck hunting season

Under section 86 of the *Wildlife Act 1975*, the Minister, by notice in the Government Gazette, may further regulate the duck hunting season where there is a need to alter the prescribed seasonal arrangements.

Under the Administration of Acts General Order dated 29 November 2018, section 86 of the *Wildlife Act 1975* is jointly administered by you, as Minister for Agriculture, and the Minister for Energy, Environment and Climate Change. Any modification to the prescribed duck hunting season must be agreed to by both Ministers.

3. Consultation

On 18 December 2020, the GMA provided information to stakeholders on current and predicted environmental conditions, waterbird habitat extent and distribution and waterfowl distribution and abundance indices throughout eastern Australia. This information was also placed on the GMA website. The GMA also provided the draft summary report findings of the 2019 Eastern Australian Waterbird Survey to stakeholders and posted it on its website (see **Attachment 2**).

The following stakeholders were invited to provide a written submission and present to the GMA, Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning (DELWP) and DJPR at a meeting on 6 January 2021:

- BirdLife Australia
- Field and Game Australia
- Sporting Shooters' Association of Australia (Vic)
- RSPCA
- Animals Australia

The following stakeholders were invited to provide a written submission only by close of business 6 January 2021:

- Shooting Sports Council of Victoria
- Victorian Duck Hunters Association
- Coalition Against Duck Shooting
- Regional Victorians Opposed to Duck Shooting

DJPR and DELWP were briefed on the information at a meeting on 22 December 2020.

A summary of stakeholder recommendations is provided in the table below. During the consultation process, stakeholders were asked specifically to provide any additional data or information on current environmental / game duck population conditions that would assist in deciding whether there was a need to alter the seasonal arrangements from those presently prescribed in regulation. Stakeholders were asked not to provide their views on duck hunting generally as that is not relevant to the annual review process. Stakeholders made thoughtful submissions. The findings of additional research provided by BirdLife Australia reaffirmed the GMA's concern over long-term game duck declines, the prolonged lack of large-scale breeding and evidence to suggest that coastal refuges were not used by waterbirds to the extent first thought during dry periods. The Victorian Duck Hunters Association provided data from its own wetland counts and made projections of the

number of ducks in Victoria, however, information was not provided on the survey methodology to ascertain whether the counts were randomised and presented a representative sample of game duck numbers.

Organisation	Position
BirdLife Australia	Cancel season
Field and Game Australia	Full length season, 10 bird daily bag limit, including a maximum of two Blue-winged Shoveler
Sporting Shooters Association of Australia	Full length season, 10 bird daily bag limit, including a maximum of two Blue-winged Shoveler
Shooting Sports Council of Victoria	Full length season, 10 bird daily bag limit, including a maximum of two Blue-winged Shoveler, plus an increased number of Wood Ducks - no number specified
Victorian Duck Hunters' Association	Full length season, 10 bird daily bag limit, including a maximum of two Blue-winged Shoveler
Animals Australia	Cancel season
RSPCA	Cancel season
Coalition Against Duck Shooting	Cancel season
Regional Victorian Opposed to Duck Shooting	Cancel season

A summary of views and issues raised by the stakeholders is included in **Attachment 3**. All invited submissions from the above groups are included at **Attachment 4**.

GMA also received one unsolicited submission. This is included at **Attachment 5**.

4. Attachments

Attachment 1 – Considerations for the 2021 duck season current as at 15 December 2020

Attachment 2 - Summary report of findings of the 2020 Eastern Australian Waterbird Survey

Attachment 3 - Summary of stakeholder views on arrangements for the 2021 duck season

Attachment 4 – Invited stakeholder submissions

Attachment 5 – Unsolicited stakeholder submission