



# Guidelines for humane dispatch of downed ducks

Published by the Game Management Authority,  
May 2025.

© The State of Victoria 2025

This publication is copyright. No part may be reproduced by any process except in accordance with the provisions of the *Copyright Act 1968*.

Authorised by the Game Management Authority,  
535 Bourke Street, Melbourne 3000.

ISBN 978-1-76090-113-4 (pdf/online/MS word)

Graphic design and Illustration:  
Billington Prideaux Associates and All Visuals

### **Disclaimer**

This publication may be of assistance to you but the State of Victoria and its employees do not guarantee that the publication is without flaw of any kind or is wholly appropriate for your particular purposes and therefore disclaims all liability for any error, loss or other consequence which may arise from you relying on any information in this publication.

For more information about the Game Management Authority go to **[www.gma.vic.gov.au](http://www.gma.vic.gov.au)**

# Contents

Introduction	01
What is a humane method for dispatching a downed duck?	02
Swatter loads	03
Make your gun safe	05
Blunt force impact	06
Option 1 – Use a blunt instrument to hit the head	06
Option 2 – Strike the head against a hard surface	08
Cervical dislocation	12
Pithing	17
Vital signs	21
‘Windmilling’ and unacceptable methods of dispatch	23
Being an effective and responsible duck hunter	24
More information	25
References	26

# Introduction

Responsible duck hunting requires downed ducks to be immediately recovered and, if not dead, dispatched humanely. A downed duck is one that has been shot and brought down. The regulations require that hunters make all reasonable attempts to immediately recover downed game birds that have been shot. If alive on recovery, the game bird must be immediately killed (i.e. dispatched). At least all breast meat must be recovered.

There are a number of ways to humanely dispatch downed ducks. The methods in this guide are recommended 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. 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 death as quickly as possible or loss of consciousness before causing the duck's death.

**Options for humane dispatch are presented in this guide and include:**

- Swatter loads
- Blunt force impact
- Cervical dislocation
- Pithing

Make sure that you:

- Choose a method that you can carry out competently and safely and that is suitable in the circumstances
- Secure your gun safely before attempting blunt force impact, cervical dislocation or pithing (see the '*Make your gun safe*' section)
- Render the duck unconscious first, where possible, through blunt force impact
- Cause the duck to die quickly without it regaining consciousness
- Confirm the duck is dead (see the '*Vital signs*' section)

## 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 a 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 sizes being #7 to #6. 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 #6 steel shot swatter loads.

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 duck where possible. The barrel with the tightest choke is preferred
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 if safe to do so
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.

# Make your gun safe

When performing the following three dispatch methods, make sure that you handle your firearm safely by unloading it, disengaging it (e.g. breaking the action open), pointing the muzzle in a safe direction and following the Firearms Safety Code ([www.firearmsafetyorg.au](http://www.firearmsafetyorg.au)).



## Secure your firearm

---

Disengage your firearm safely by breaking the action open and securing it (e.g. in the crook of your arm) or place it down if safe to do so.

## Blunt force impact

Preferably, a recovered duck that is still alive should be rendered unconscious before attempting to dispatch it. Blunt force impact can be used as a method to render a duck unconscious prior to dispatch but can sometimes be sufficient to humanely dispatch the duck outright if undertaken with enough force.

There are two recommended methods to apply blunt force impact:

- **Option 1** – Use a blunt instrument to hit the duck's head
- **Option 2** – Strike the duck's head against a hard surface (see page 08)

### Option 1 – Use a blunt instrument to hit the head

#### 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 or at the back of the duck's skull. This can be delivered vertically or horizontally depending on how the duck is positioned (see below)

5. Check vital signs or perform a 'touch test' to see if the duck is dead (see the 'Vital signs' section)
6. If the duck is not dead, make sure the duck is unconscious by checking the following signs:
  - lack of eye blinking
  - lack of muscle tension in the bill and neck
  - no controlled movement of the head
7. After checking for signs of unconsciousness, proceed with a secondary method to dispatch the duck (e.g. cervical dislocation or pithing)



#### **Step 1 to 4. Use a blunt instrument to hit the head**

A heavy blunt instrument such as a priest can be an effective method to quickly render the duck unconscious or dispatch it.

With a heavy blunt instrument, strike the duck on the top or back of the skull with a single blow. Ensure you use enough force.

## Option 2 – Strike the head against a hard surface

Hitting a duck's head against a hard surface, if undertaken correctly and with sufficient force, will either render the duck unconscious or can humanely dispatch a duck.

Depending on the size of the duck, one or two hands may be required. Follow the instructions below.

### Instructions

1. Find a suitable solid surface that you will use for striking a duck's head against that will not move or compress during the impact (e.g. a log, stump, hull of a boat, rock)
2. Secure your firearm safely
3. If the duck is small, hold the duck firmly around the abdomen so that its belly is in your palm and your fingers are able to pin the wings against its body (see page 10)
4. Hold the duck at a sufficient height to give you enough momentum to swiftly and forcefully swing downwards to strike its head against a solid surface (see page 10)
5. If the duck is large, hold the duck firmly around the abdomen with both hands, with the duck's back resting on your fingers and the wings pinned against the duck's body (see page 11)
6. Hold the duck with both hands at a sufficient height that will give you enough momentum to swiftly and forcefully swing downwards to strike its head against a solid surface (see page 11)

7. Be sure to apply enough force that ONE blow to the head is sufficient to dispatch the duck or render it unconscious
8. Confirm that the duck is dead by checking the vital signs or performing a 'touch test' (see the '*Vital signs*' section)
9. If the duck is not dead, determine if it is unconscious by checking the following signs:
  - lack of eye blinking
  - lack of muscle tension in the bill and neck
  - no controlled movement of the head
10. If the duck is unconscious, proceed with cervical dislocation or pithing to dispatch the duck

If you can't render the duck unconscious using blunt force impact, cervical dislocation (NOT pithing) should be used to dispatch the duck (see the '*Cervical dislocation*' section)

**Blunt force impact is only humane if delivered with ONE blow**



## One hand technique



**Step 3. If the duck is small, hold the duck with one hand**

Hold the duck firmly around the abdomen so that its belly is in your palm and your fingers are able to pin the wings against the duck's body.



**Step 4. Strike the duck's head against a hard surface using one hand**

Hold the duck at a sufficient height to give you enough momentum to swiftly and forcefully swing downwards to strike its head against a solid surface.

## Two hand technique



**Step 5. If the duck is large, hold the duck with two hands**

Hold the duck firmly around the abdomen with both hands, with the duck's back resting on your fingers and the wings pinned against the duck's body.



**Step 6. Strike the duck's head against hard surface using two hands**

Hold the duck with both hands at a sufficient height that will give you enough momentum to swiftly and forcefully swing downwards and strike its head against a solid surface.

# Cervical dislocation

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

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

## 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 '*Blunt force impact*' section). If this is not possible, proceed straight to cervical dislocation

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 (shoulders)



### **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.

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

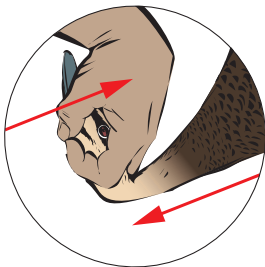
**Wing flapping and other strong muscular movements can occur after death**



#### **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.

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 the neck downwards and the legs upwards at the same time maintaining 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**

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

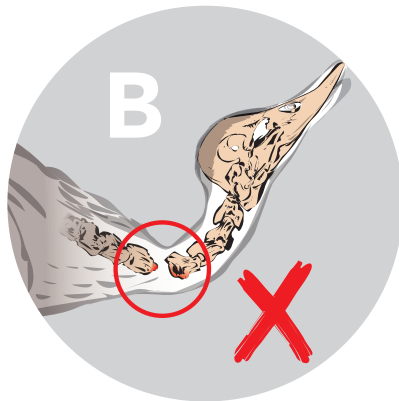
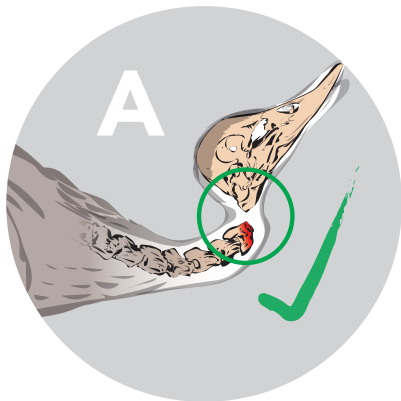


#### **Step 6: Apply force**

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

7. Using your thumb and forefinger, feel along the neck up towards the base of the skull checking for a clear separation between the neck bones and the skull. If you can't feel a 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 a gap between the neck and 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 via blunt force impact (see '*Blunt force impact*' section). 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 upwards into the brain, to ensure brain destruction.

If the opportunity presents, practice pithing on a dead duck.

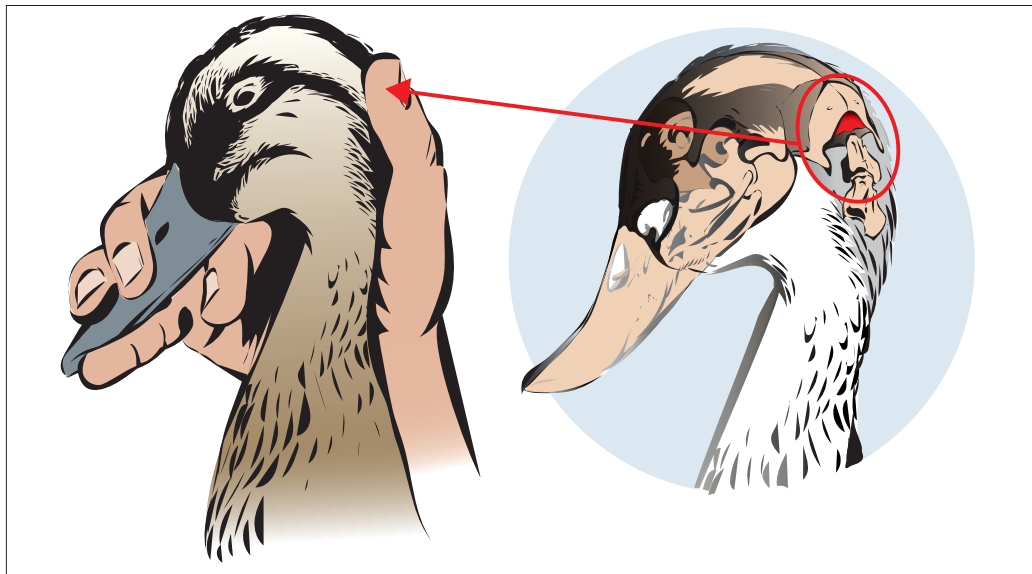


**Commercially available pithing tool**



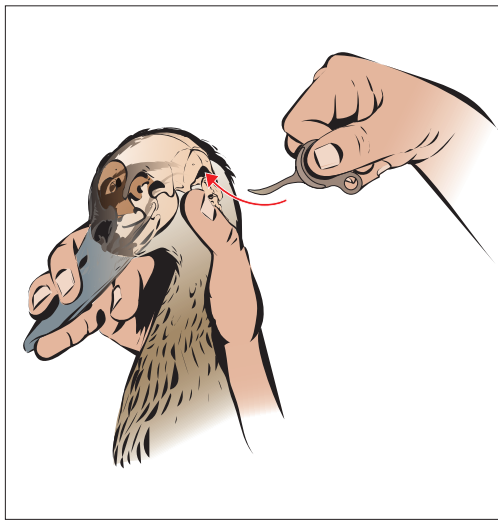
## Instructions

1. Secure your firearm safely to ensure both hands are free
2. The duck MUST be rendered unconscious before performing pithing (see the '*Blunt force impact*' 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 19)
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 19)
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 eyes (see page 20)
7. After the tool is in the correct position, twist it around a few times to ensure the brain is destroyed (see page 20)
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.

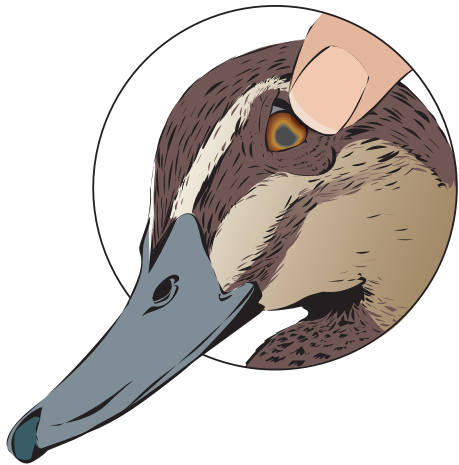
## Vital signs

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**

---

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



### **Check vital signs**

---

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 rapid unconsciousness and death. Generally, 'windmilling' breaks the neck and the bird can be conscious for several minutes. Therefore, 'windmilling' is NOT recommended.

## Other unacceptable methods to dispatch downed ducks include:

- Drowning
- Suffocation
- Rib compression (thoracic compression)

# 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
- Ensure the shot strikes 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.

## More information

Instructional videos on each of the dispatch methods can be found at:

Guidelines for the humane dispatch of downed ducks - Game Management Authority ([gma.vic.gov.au](http://gma.vic.gov.au))

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 *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.



## References

AgriFutures Australia (2020). National Code of Practice for the Humane Shooting of Kangaroos and Wallabies for Commercial Purposes. AgriFutures Australia Publication No. 20-126 (<https://www.agrifutures.com.au/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/20-126-digital.pdf>).

*Australian Animal Welfare Standards and Guidelines — Land Transport of Livestock*. Animal Health Australia (AHA) 2012, Canberra, ([www.animalwelfarestandards.net.au](http://www.animalwelfarestandards.net.au)).

*Australian and New Zealand Council for the Care of Animals in Research and Teaching (ANZCCART)*. Euthanasia of Animals Used for Scientific Purposes. ANZCCART (2001). Glen Osmond, South Australia, ([www.adelaide.edu.au/ANZCCART/codes/australian/](http://www.adelaide.edu.au/ANZCCART/codes/australian/)).

*Code of Practice for duck hunting in Tasmania*. Wildlife Management Branch, Department of Primary Industries and Water, Tasmania, ([www.dpipwe.tas.gov.au](http://www.dpipwe.tas.gov.au)).

DAFF 2022, Australian Animal Welfare Standards and Guidelines for Poultry, Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry, Canberra, July. CC BY 4.0.

Department of Parks and Wildlife (DPaW) (2013). Standard Operating Procedure No. 15.1. Humane killing of animals under field conditions in wildlife management. DPaW, Species and Communities Branch, Locked Bag 104 Bentley Delivery Centre WA 6983 (<https://www.cdu.edu.au/files/2019-11/dpaw-sop15.1-humane-killing-of-animals.pdf>).

*Practical Guidelines for On-Farm Euthanasia of Poultry 2nd Edition*. Poultry Industry Council (2016) Canada, ([www.poultryindustrycouncil.ca](http://www.poultryindustrycouncil.ca)).

*Practical Slaughter of Poultry*. Humane Slaughter Association (2013). Wheathampstead, Herts, United Kingdom, ([www.hsa.org.uk](http://www.hsa.org.uk)).

Sharp T (2016) NATSOP-GEN001 National Standard Operating Procedure: Methods of euthanasia. PestSmart website. <https://pestsmart.org.au/pest-animals/general-methods-of-euthanasia-in-field-conditions/>



[www.gma.vic.gov.au](http://www.gma.vic.gov.au)