

# Duck Shooting Fact Sheet

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## Sport or slaughter?

The recreational shooting of ducks in Australia causes suffering to countless numbers of native waterbirds.

Some species of duck are permitted to be shot each year during an open season in Victoria, South Australia, Tasmania and in private ricefields in NSW. Animal welfare and conservation groups oppose the killing.

During the current drought, both Victoria and South Australia cancelled their recreational duck shooting season for 2007 due to the low numbers of ducks in Eastern Australia. Tasmania still permitted the duck season in 2007.



## The Cruelty of Wounding

Birds suffer pain and stress when they are wounded by shotgun pellets. Computer simulation estimates and the observations of 'rescuers' on the wetlands indicates that duck shooters wound at least as many birds as they kill outright.

The physical action of a shotgun involves a spray of pellets, and a flying bird can be wounded by even a single pellet. Other birds flying with the target bird can also be wounded. Depending on the distance between gun and bird it may take a number of pellets to kill a bird outright. Those downed birds who are not recovered may suffer over long period before recovery or death from their wounds or through predation by foxes.

## Computer Simulation of Possible Wounding

A computer model of the action of a shotgun and the flying bird concluded that most competent shooters will average one bird wounded for each bird bagged (taken home), and the 'best' that can be hoped for is one bird for every two bagged. As there are inexperienced or unpractised shooters, particularly on the opening weekend of a duck shooting season, this model suggests that there are at least as many birds wounded as stowed into hunters bags. (1)

## X-Ray Evidence of Wounding

More direct evidence of the wounding rate can be found in a 15 year study conducted by the Victorian Department of Conservation which fluoroscoped (a type of x-ray) 45,210 "game" species

and found that 9.2 per cent had been wounded and survived. (2)

Similarly, a further study undertaken at Bool Lagoon in South Australia showed that of birds captured for the study (they are later released) 8 per cent of the small Grey Teal, 12 per cent of the medium-sized Black Duck and 17 per cent of the larger Mountain Duck (Shelduck) had lead shot pellets embedded in their bodies. (3)

It can be assumed that these figures underestimate the numbers of birds wounded. Some wounded birds will be retrieved by hunters and have their necks wrung or be shot a second time, others will escape but will have died from their wounds or be taken by predators, due to their weakened state. It is also possible X-rays will not show lead pellets in some previously wounded birds because the shots have passed through their bodies.

### **Veterinary Evidence**

Dr Roger Meischke, an experienced veterinarian, attended a veterinary rescue unit at the opening of the NSW duck shooting season for several years (in the early 1990s) and gathered information on the cause of death or the type of wounds suffered by retrieved waterbirds. In 1991 and 1992, some 40 per cent of dead retrieved birds were inhumanely killed (i.e. their injuries indicated they would have suffered prior to death) and in 1993, the figure was 34 per cent. (4)

Dr Meischke's study is supported by the experience of other veterinarians who staff rescue caravans in South Australia and Victoria. As with x-ray evidence, the number of wounded birds taken to veterinarians will be only a proportion of the birds actually wounded.

### **Lead Ingestion Causes Suffering**

Birds who ingest spent lead shot may endure prolonged suffering before death. Waterbirds, often bottom-feeding species, can develop lead poisoning after ingesting just one lead shot, usually left after duck shooting. The ingested lead shot is trapped in the gizzard then passes through the gastro-intestinal tract. The lead from the eroded shot is absorbed and deposited in the tissues. The use of lead shot has now been banned in each State, but the ban is not well policed. Despite the bans, tonnes of lead still remain in the environment from past shooting as lead does not break down.

### **Protected (non-game) Species Are Also Shot**

Many non-game birds have been retrieved from the wetlands during duck season, including legally protected species such as the rare and endangered Freckled Duck.

Although Waterfowl Identification Test (WIT) has been introduced in Victoria, New South Wales, Tasmania and South Australia, it is a once-only test, and some shooters fire before they have identified the species they are aiming at. Although not easily mistaken for game birds, 'protected' species such as swan, ibis, spoonbill, cormorant and long-billed corella, are sometimes shot.

### **Disturbance and Stress Caused to Other Wildlife Species**

Some of the birds brought in by rescuers show neurogenic shock alone. This observation is supported by the reports of exhausted birds (both 'game birds' and protected species) each season confused and trying to avoid the gunfire. For example: *"Of particular interest were the Black Swans which are at Cullens Lake and Lake Buloke (NW Victoria) in large numbers. The swans took flight at the first shots and remained flying around the area during the next few hours. By mid-morning many were seen to be exhausted and having great difficulty maintaining height. One was seen to crash into a tent at Lake Buloke. Others landed heavily on water."*-R.C. Hunter, RSPCA Victoria. (5)

A primary problem which leads to further suffering of birds is that some shooters do not retrieve downed birds immediately. Injured birds are also often difficult to find in reedy waterways and may suffer from their injuries for a considerable time before death or recovery.

## Duck shooter numbers decreasing

Since the commencement of the campaigns against duck shooting in the 1980s, the number of shooters has been dramatically reduced – it is no longer supported by the majority of Australians. For example, in Victoria, where by far the greatest number of duck shooters reside, duck shooter numbers have decreased drastically from about 95,000 in 1986 to less than 20,000. This is due to a number of factors, including the ban on semi-automatic weapons, and the negative image of recreational shooting, which has been influenced greatly by the media. Rescuers have used planes to buzz over the wetlands encouraging birds away from danger shooting zones and also had mobile vets on hand to give immediate assistance to injured birds.

## High Court Challenge

In August 1996, The Coalition Against Duck Shooting challenged the High Court on the validity of the Governments "human safety" regulations introduced in 1993, which banned both rescuers and the media from the public wetlands until 10am, some four hours after the shooting starts on the opening two days of the duck season.

*"The graphic words and pictures of wounded birds and illegally shot protected species, including the rare and threatened Freckled Duck, are a political liability for shooters and an embarrassment for the government. ...The regulations were designed to keep both rescuers and the media away from the front line, at precisely those times when the killing and wounding of native birds is at its peak. ...Journalists and camera crews travel to war-torn countries like Somalia, Rwanda and Bosnia in an endeavour to seek the truth, yet the Kennett Government deems it too risky for the media to cover the opening of recreational duck shooting."* **Laurie Levy**

The High Court challenge was subsequently lost.

## Answering the Shooters' Claims

Arguments put forward by shooting organisations in defence of duck shooting include the financial boost hunters provide for some rural towns, particularly on opening weekend, the income for the gun and ammunition industry, and the 'satisfaction' of hunters who like to hunt and kill ducks for eating. Shooting groups also point to the conservation work they have participated in on some wetlands.

Animal welfare and conservation groups counter with the arguments that "eco-tourism" (visitors to the wetlands for birdwatching and other non-violent recreation) could easily replace the (arguable) financial loss for rural communities; and that the lead shot problem and the killing of 'protected' species cancel out any benefit provided by shooting organisations' work. Towns such as Kerang, Boort and Donald in northern Victoria could make the same millions of dollars through eco-tourism as does Phillip Island with the penguins, and Warrnambool with the Southern Right Whales. North Western Victoria could rival, and be as popular a tourist attraction as, Kakadu National Park.

## Ducks Considered 'Game' Birds

**It varies from state to state - they are all native waterbirds**

- (Pacific) Black Duck
- Wood Duck (Maned Duck)
- Grey Teal
- Chestnut Teal
- Pink-eared Duck
- Mountain Duck (Australian Shelduck)

- Hardhead (White-eyed Duck)
- Australasian Shoveller

## Progress to Date

**1990** Western Australia banned recreational duck shooting.

**1993** South Australia banned lead shot. Shooter numbers in that state fell to about 2,000.

**1995** The NSW Government banned recreational duck shooting. Legislation was successfully passed through both houses of the NSW parliament.

**1996** PM John Howard and State Premiers banned semi-automatic weapons, including semi-automatic and pump-action shotguns, having a great impact by reducing numbers of shooters.

**2001** Lead shot phase out commenced in Victoria

**2005** The Queensland Government banned recreational duck shooting.

## Quotes

*"Hunters have demonstrated time and again that collectively they cannot be relied on to correctly identify threatened waterfowl, despite the best efforts of CNR (Victoria) to educate them. Therefore waters containing threatened waterfowl such as Freckled Duck and Blue-billed Ducks must be closed to shooting."*

—Dr David Baker-Gabb

Director, Royal Australasian Ornithologists Union (RAOU):  
Media release, 16 March 1994.

*"There is widespread opposition throughout the community to the cruelty and environmental damage caused by shooters... Evidence from previous [WA] seasons shows that injured ducks have been left to die, protected species have been shot, and fragile wetlands have been polluted by lead and cartridges. Our community has reached a stage of enlightenment where it can no longer accept the institutionalised killing of native birds for recreation."*

—Dr Carmen Lawrence

Former Premier of Western Australia  
Media statement, 3 September 1990  
announcing a ban on recreational duckshooting in WA

*...blatant, indiscriminate slaughter, which has no place in a civilised society."*

—Editorial

The Age, 4 February 1994

*"It is hard to convince anyone ... that this ugly spectacle has anything to do with sport. The violent killing and maiming of native birds and animals can no longer be regarded as a legitimate recreational pursuit."*

—Editorial

The Age, 22 April 1995

## Further Editorials

The Sunday Age editorial calls on the Bracks Victorian Government to ban the recreational

shooting of native waterbirds in Victoria on both 12 January 2003 and again on **19 March 2005**.

*"Duck shooting is not a sport. It is a cowardly, violent, anti-social act. Sport is an equal contest between humans, such as football, hockey, tennis, athletics etc. Waterbirds cannot defend themselves let alone fight back against shooters armed with powerful weapons, dogs, whistles and decoys. It is a one-sided cowardly activity."*

—Laurie Levy

Coalition Against Duck Shooting, Melbourne

<http://www.duck.org.au> (<http://www.duck.org.au/>)

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## References

- (1) G. Russell, "Duck hunting and the myth of the clean kill", *Animals Today*, Vol.2.No.1. February-April 1994, (12-13).
  - (2) F. Norman, "The incidence of lead shotgun pellets in waterfowl (Anatidae and Rallidae) examined in south eastern Australia between 1957 and 1973", *Australian Wildlife Research*, 1976, Vol.3.(61-71).
  - (3) Report on the task force enquiring into duck hunting in South Australia, October 1990.
  - (4) R. Meischke, "The 1993 duck report" and two earlier reports.
  - (5) RSPCA field observations of the 1994 duck season opening. Incorporating the observations of 12 RSPCA officers at Lake Cowal, West Wyalong and at Lake Buloke and Cullens Lake on 19/20 March 1994.
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