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Duck Hunting Season 2021

RSPCA Tasmania Issues Paper

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1. Executive summary

In the first week of March, the annual duck shooting season will once again start in Tasmania. Over three months, native ducks will be blasted out of the skies in the name of sport. The targets include five species of ducks, three of which mate for life. Non-target as well as targeted birds will be wounded and die a painful and lingering death. As part of this legalised "sport", hunters are permitted to shoot up to ten ducks each day.

According to government reports, 1134 licences were issued for the 2019 season. This shows that only a very small proportion of Tasmanians are actively involved in duck hunting. In fact, 1134 licences represents just 0.2% of the population – or 2 in every thousand of us.

DPIPWE estimated that these hunters shot approximately 49,671 ducks over the three month season. Studies show it is likely that as many as 13,000 more ducks would be wounded but not killed – and die in agony.

Tasmania's native wildlife is globally recognised as unique and remarkable. It is an essential responsibility of the state government to ensure the wild populations of these animals remain at healthy, sustainable levels.

Yet we have no up-to-date population data to inform decisions that might impact our wildlife – like continuing to permit shooting of wild ducks.

A survey of licenced duck shooters undertaken last year by the Victorian government found that:

- 80% could not reliably distinguish between permitted species and non-target species – some of which may be endangered;
- Barely a third had any knowledge of wounding rates; and
- Only 1 in 10 had any knowledge of how to humanely kill wounded birds.

These are appalling statistics by any measure.

Without any independent evidence to the contrary, there is no reason to believe that the situation would be any different in Tasmania.

Recognising the strong evidence of the extreme suffering involved by the animals, and the community's lack of support for recreational hunting, three states in Australia (Western Australia, NSW, and Queensland) have already banned recreational duck hunting.

Last year, in a draft minute to the Tasmanian Minister for Primary Industries, Parks, Water and Environment, departmental officers recommended that the 2020 open season be cut back on conservation grounds.

The government did not take that advice.

The RSPCA does not believe there is justification for continuing to licence hunters to shoot ducks for sport – and community concern for the welfare of native ducks make it clear that there is no social licence for this to continue.

The fact that departmental experts advised that the duck season is unsustainable highlights even more reason for the government to address this unacceptable situation.

Surely there is now enough evidence for the Tasmanian government to recognise changing public sentiment and take drastic measures to stop the slaughter by instituting a permanent ban on duck shooting.

Realistically, it is too late to implement change this year. So RSPCA calls on the government to announce that this year will be the last time native duck species face decimation by hunters in Tasmania.

However, if duck hunting is to continue beyond 2021, there should be a five year phase-out period, with a ban coming into force in 2026.

During this phase-out period, it is imperative that urgent steps be taken to reduce the negative welfare impacts for ducks and off-target species during the phaseout period. Recommendations as to what this would involve are outlined elsewhere in this report.

2. Duck hunting in Tasmania

2.1 Target Species

Five species of waterfowl may be hunted during the open season in Tasmania:

- Chestnut Teal
- Grey Teal
- Australian Wood Duck
- Mountain Duck
- Pacific Black Duck.

Three of these species form monogamous relationships: the Wood Duck, the Mountain Duck, and Chestnut Teal.

Chestnut Teal

Chestnut Teals form monogamous pairs that stay together outside the breeding season. Both parents choose and defend a nest site and the male stays with the female while she incubates the eggs. The nest is usually located over water, in a down-lined tree hollow about 6m to 10m high. Sometimes nests are placed on the ground, among clumps of grass near water, and are little more than a scrape, lined with down. Artificial nest boxes of the right size and located in suitable habitat will also be readily used. Males do not assist with incubation but do look after the young when hatched.

[\(https://australian.museum/learn/animals/birds/chestnut-teal/\)](https://australian.museum/learn/animals/birds/chestnut-teal/)



Grey Teal

Grey Teals may breed when there is available food and waterways are suitable. Taking advantage of this opportunistic breeding style, birds lay soon after suitable conditions arrive and may raise several broods while the conditions remain favourable. If conditions are not suitable, birds may not breed at all in a year. Most breeding takes place around inland waterways, and nests may be placed on the ground, in rabbit burrows or in tree hollows. The birds normally lay their eggs on the bare floor of the nest site, which are then covered with down (feathers).

<https://www.birdsinbackyards.net/species/Anas-gracilis>



Australian Wood Duck

The Australian Wood Duck forms monogamous breeding pairs that stay together year round. It nests in tree holes, above or near water, often re-using the same site. Both parents feed young and young birds remain with them up to a month after fledging. This duck nests in a tree cavity laying 9–11 cream-white eggs. The female incubates them while the male stands guard. Once the ducklings are ready to leave the nest, the female flies to the ground and the duckling will leap to the ground and follow their parents. The males also secure their ducklings closely along with the females.

(<https://australian.museum/learn/animals/birds/australian-wood-duck/>)



Mountain Duck

The nest of the Australian Shelduck (mountain duck) is usually in a large tree hollow, well lined with down. They have also been known to breed in rabbit burrows and in large hollows on cliff faces. Flightless downy young may gather in creches. Only the female Australian Shelduck incubates the eggs, while the male defends the brood territory. This species is monogamous, and some birds are known to create permanent pair-bonds.

(<https://australian.museum/learn/animals/birds/australian-shelduck/>)



Pacific Black Duck

Mating in Pacific Black Ducks coincides with availability of sufficient food and water, and often with the onset of heavy rains or when waterways are at their peaks. Courtship is accompanied by ritualised displays including preening, bobbing and wing-flapping. This behaviour is often initiated by the female, and, other than copulation, the male helps little in the breeding process. Often, two broods will be raised in a year. The number of offspring produced may seem quite high, but only 20% of these will survive past two years of age.

(<https://www.birdsinbackyards.net/species/Anas-superciliosa>)



2.2 Recreational duck hunting

The recreational duck hunting season in Tasmania occurs at around the same time each year, with exact dates varying dependent upon the calendar.

Recent season dates have been as follows:

- 2021: from 6 March to 6 June
- 2020: from 7 March to 8 June
- 2019: from 9 March till 10 June
- 2018: from 10 March till 11 June.

According to data published by DPIPWE in *Game Tracks* (issue 25, 2020), 1134 licences were issued for the 2019 season, a number which has remained relatively static over the past five years.

The number of licences issued shows that only a very small proportion of Tasmanians are actively involved in duck hunting. In fact, 1134 licences represents just 0.2% of the population of 540,600 – or 2 people in every 1000.

According to DPIPWE, preliminary figures show hunters reported taking 33,684 ducks over the three month open season. Based on this, DPIPWE estimated that approximately 49,671 ducks were taken in 2019, similar to the harvest in recent years.

This information was provided by DPIPWE in *Game Tracks* last year:

Harvest Season	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019
Licences Sold	967	1 100	1 192	1 158	1 178	1 161	1 134
Reported Take	44 140	44 565	43 758	35 765	50 391	39 931	33 684
Take per Licence Return	50.5	53.6	42.4	39.4	49.0	48.0	43.8
Total Estimated Take	48 837	58 991	50 529	45 603	57 068	55 884	49 671

Table 1: Wild Duck Hunting Licences issued and reported take from 2013-19. Based on preliminary data as at October 2019.

The estimated take is 147% of the reported take. However, it is not clear on what basis the reported take is converted to the estimated take. Without further explanation, it would not be unreasonable to infer that the department accepts significant under-reporting by hunters (ie a factor of almost 50%). Greater transparency and accountability is clearly of vital importance.

No information is provided as to the numbers of birds wounded but not killed. Based on contemporary studies, this could be as high as 26% - or another 13,000 birds left wounded, dying in agony.

At time of writing, no information was available for the 2020 season

The cost of a duck licence is \$32.40 or \$25.92 (concession).

As it is not possible to determine the breakdown between full licences and concession licences. Assuming all 1134 licences were issued at full cost, the maximum contribution of the sector to government would be \$36,417.60. In the overall scheme of things this is a derisory amount that would go nowhere near covering the costs incurred in managing the season and the hunters, let alone reflecting environmental costs and impacts on native waterfowl.

Licensed duck hunting is permitted during the hunting season on various reserves across the state. At the beginning of each season, DPIPWE releases a Public Notice of the Reserves. Several of these reserves are RAMSAR-listed wetlands and therefore of international significance in protecting native and migratory bird species including waterfowl.

During hunting season, the stipulated five species of ducks may only be taken with shotguns not exceeding 12-gauge. When shooting over any public or private watercourse, the guns must only be loaded with non-toxic shot (not lead). There is a bag limit of 10 ducks a day per licensed hunter but there is no maximum take except for the 10/day x days in the season.

In order to be issued with a Wild Duck licence, hunters need to have passed the Waterfowl Identification Test (WIT). Currently, the WIT only needs to be taken once, and someone with pass mark as low as 47 out of 66 can still be issued a licence. This means that 19 out of each 66 birds shot at could possibly be protected or endangered species. This is an unacceptable risk.

It is also a condition of every licence that a Game Take Return form for the previous season be completed and submitted to DPIPWE. This return includes information on the number of each species taken and the region where they were taken. However, as no detailed information is made publicly available from this data collection, it is impossible to determine whether the requirement is being met – or to determine impacts on populations.

2.3 Data collection and integrity

Information with respect to duck hunting in Tasmania is not easy to find. The government is known to have been collecting data on duck population for decades. However, that information is not in the public domain, so it is not subject to independent verification and scrutiny.

The official government count each year only takes place at selected wetlands. How representative that survey is of the population as a whole is unknown.

Another problem is with the reliability of data collection, which is usually undertaken by DPIPWE staff, volunteers, farmers and shooters themselves. Clearly, there is a risk that the data is compromised in terms of a conflict of interest.

In the interests of transparency, all data should be released so that independent experts assess whether the species are being managed sustainably or not.

2.4 Hunter knowledge

A survey undertaken in 2020 by the Victorian Game Management Authority found that:

- Only 20% of duck/quail shooters were able to answer a three-part question on identifying game species;

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- Only 37% of duck shooters could correctly answer a two-part question on wounding rates; and
 - Only 13% of duck shooters could answer a detailed question on the humane killing of downed birds.

In other words:

- 80% of licenced shooters could not reliably distinguish between permitted species and non-target species – some of which may be endangered;
- Barely a third of licenced shooters had any knowledge of wounding rates; and
- Just over 1 in 10 licenced shooters had any knowledge of how to humanely kill wounded birds.

These are appalling statistics by any measure.

Without any independent evidence to the contrary, there is no reason to believe that these figures would differ meaningfully from those in Tasmania.

3. Impacts of duck hunting

3.1 Duck welfare

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.

Shotguns fire a cluster of pellets rather than a single bullet as with a rifle. Shotguns rely upon hitting vital organs (mainly heart and lungs) in the body to cause death. As there are always open spaces in the pellet cluster, many ducks are hit with shot but are not killed outright - ie wings and other body tissues and organs may be hit causing injury but not death. Thus, large scale cruelty is inevitable. Some ducks will drown, whilst others may be unable to fly, or feed, thus leaving them exposed to starvation, the elements or predators.

There has been no research done in Tasmania as to wounding rates of ducks, and there have been no regulatory interventions to minimise wounding or non-target species fatalities. It would therefore seem reasonable to assume that the wounding rate would be similar to situations studied in other jurisdictions.

A study by Clausen et al (2017) compared crippling rates in pink-footed geese in Denmark before and after an awareness campaign was launched which aimed to reduce crippling rates. This study strongly suggested a positive effect of the campaign, showing a decline from 36% to 20% in the number of geese crippled.

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.

RSPCA Tasmania is unaware of any similar studies on the duck hunting statistics for Tasmania. In the absence of any evidence to the contrary, it would once again seem reasonable to assume that the situation here would be similar.

No interventions have been put in place in order to reduce the wounding rate in Tasmania. Therefore, based on the above Australian studies alone, it can be assumed that 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 estimated total harvest figure of 49,671 from the 2019 Tasmanian season, this would mean that over 12,900 ducks were wounded and not killed outright.

This amount of wounding is unacceptably high and needs to be reduced as a matter of urgency. It is therefore vitally important that research be undertaken to determine the wounding rates of ducks.

Education campaigns on how to reduce wounding must also be developed, along with an awareness campaign encouraging a wider understanding amongst the general public of the importance of waterfowl communities in the Tasmanian environment.

3.2 Game bird numbers

Tasmania's native wildlife is globally recognised as unique and remarkable. It is an essential responsibility of the state government to ensure the wild populations of these animals remain at healthy, sustainable levels.

Yet we have no up-to-date population data to inform decisions that might impact our wildlife – like continuing to permit shooting of wild ducks.

An Aerial Survey of Wetland Birds in Eastern Australia is carried out each year. The data demonstrates the dire conditions that wetland birds are facing in the face of prolonged drought.

Specifically, the latest survey shows that:

- Total waterbird abundance in 2020 decreased from 2019 and remains well below average.
- Breeding abundance and breeding species richness decreased considerably in 2020, when compared with the previous year.
- 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, Grey Teal numbers declined significantly since 2019.
- Four of the five species that together made up 92% of the birds shot in 2020 continue to show long term declines in their abundance (ie the Pacific Black Duck, Australian Wood Duck, Grey Teal, and Mountain Duck).
- 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. Whilst available habitat slightly improved from 2019 (which was the lowest on record), long-term trends show continuing declines in waterbird abundance, breeding and breeding species richness.

3.3 Climate outlook

Water bird breeding seasons are closely linked with climatic conditions. The general increase in temperatures that the planet is experiencing, as well as the drier overall conditions, hinders the breeding pattern of many waterbirds. Habitats are being destroyed or are changing with the climate changes and so each year there is less safe habitat for water birds. In years where conditions are not ideal, there is a marked decrease in the number of water birds noted.

According to the Bureau of Meteorology, the average maximum temperature for December 2020 to February 2021 is likely to be higher than the long-term average for Tasmania, Victoria, parts of SA and NSW, 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 southeast WA, where there is a closer to 60% chance.

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).

The World Meteorological Organisation recently released a report showing that 2011-2020 was the warmest decade on record. The report stated that rising global temperatures have contributed to more frequent and severe extreme weather events around the world.

These extreme weather patterns have detrimental effects on many species, including birds. Breeding patterns can be disturbed, migration timings and routes can be interrupted, the number of eggs in a clutch can be affected and habitat destruction resulting in making species more vulnerable to predator attacks – all affect the chances of survival of a species.

4. Community attitudes towards duck hunting

In 2020, RSPCA Victoria engaged a market research firm to formally undertake a survey and analysis of Victorians' attitudes to duck welfare. This was a representative sample of 3,683 Victorian respondents across two different periods of surveying.

The overwhelming majority of those surveyed (84%) 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.

Two thirds (65%) of those surveyed considered native duck welfare to be important or extremely important. This similarly remained unchanged across the two periods of surveying.

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.

A 2020 survey of 1015 people in South Australia found almost three quarters of respondents wanted duck hunting stopped. Almost three quarters of respondents said they would not visit areas if duck-shooters were present.

Tasmania has built a strong tourism sector on the basis of our natural environment and 'clean and green' reputation. Tourism surveys recognise how lucrative nature tourism is for regional communities, and regions are increasingly tapping into it.

Tasmania acts as a refuge for mainland and migratory waterfowl, especially during mainland droughts. To shoot these birds while they are sheltering in Tasmania cannot be justified and destroys any claims of 'sustainability'.

RSPCA Tasmania is not aware of any formal surveys which been undertaken to determine the Tasmanian community's attitudes towards recreational duck hunting.

However, many people we talk to are vehemently opposed to continuation of duck hunting in the state because:

- It's a recreational sport – the only reason for the killing is for sport; and
- The accuracy of the kill – how many birds are shot and killed instantaneously and how many suffer, not caught and die a horrible death.

It is clear that community attitudes are changing and that there is no longer a social licence for recreational duck hunting.

5. 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."

The RSPCA opposes the recreational hunting of ducks because of the inherent and inevitable pain and suffering caused. Every year, during government-declared "open seasons", many thousands of ducks are shot over the wetlands of Australia in the name of sport.

Some of these ducks will be killed outright. Some will be wounded, brought down and killed on retrieval. Many others will be crippled or wounded and will die within a few hours or days. Some will suffer prolonged pain before doing so.

Many veterinarians have attended duck shoots to tend to injured birds and have been appalled at the extent and nature of injuries afflicted including severely damaged bills, legs and wing injuries, as well as muscle and tissue damage. In 1991-1993, veterinarian Dr Roger Meischke attended a rescue unit at the opening of the NSW duck shooting season. He reported that in 1991 and 1992 approximately 40% of dead or retrieved birds were inhumanely killed (ie their injuries indicated they would have suffered prior to death). In 1993, the figure was 34%.

RSPCA Tasmania fully supports these principles and recognises that these outcomes do not under any circumstances meet modern community expectations.

6. The way forward

In July 2020, in a draft minute to the Tasmanian Minister for Primary Industries, Parks, Water and Environment, departmental officers recommended that the 2020 open season be cut back on conservation grounds.

According to this expert advice, Tasmania supports an integral part of the eastern Australian duck population and should therefore take into account recent surveys of waterbird populations and wetland areas across the eastern mainland states and, like mainland states, Tasmania should take a conservative approach to harvesting ducks in 2020.

It was also recommended that public wetlands be kept closed in order to protect native ducks at risk due to recent poor environmental conditions.

It is clear from the seasonal influx of birds that Tasmania serves as an important climate refuge for waterfowl in Australia. So a business-as-usual duck hunting season in Tasmania has a potential effect on waterfowl populations in south-eastern Australia and perhaps even more widely.

It is time the Minister responded to important expert advice within his own department and treated the whole of Tasmania as a sanctuary for waterfowl.

There's no way a government can say with one breath 'we're sustainably managing our waterfowl populations' and then allow birds to be shot at a time when populations are still recovering from catastrophic droughts here and on the mainland.

RSPCA Tasmania does not believe there is justification for a duck shooting season under any circumstances. Community concern for the welfare of native ducks, combined with data on species abundance, climate outlook and habitat conditions make it clear that continued recreational shooting of ducks is no longer a tenable approach.

The fact that departmental experts advised that the duck season is unsustainable highlights even more reason for the government to address this unacceptable situation.

Surely there is now enough evidence to for the state government to recognise changing public sentiment to take drastic measures to stop the slaughter and institute a permanent ban on duck shooting in this state.

RSPCA Tasmania recognises that it is too late to implement significant change for the 2021 season. On that basis, we call on the government to announce that this will be the last recreational duck hunting season in Tasmania.

However, if duck hunting is to continue beyond 2021, there should be a five year phase-out period with a ban coming into force in 2026.

If that is the case, it is imperative that urgent steps be taken to reduce the negative welfare impacts for ducks and off-target species during the phaseout period.

Therefore, commencing with the 2021 season, RSPCA calls on the state government to:

- Commission a survey of community attitudes to duck hunting;
- In the interests of transparency, immediately release all data related to duck hunting so that independent experts can assess whether the species are being managed sustainably;
- Implement annual population surveys of target (and non-target) species to assess short term fluctuations in numbers (perhaps due to drought or other seasonal conditions) as well as monitor long term trends in population numbers;
- Introduce an annual waterfowl identification test for all licence applicants, with the successful identification rate of 80% required to be granted a licence increasing to 100% over 3 years;
- Implement mandatory participation in a shotgun education program as a licence requirement;
- Conduct an annual survey to determine the wounding rates of ducks and the impact of duck hunting on non-target species, with a maximum non-target fatality rate reducing to 10% over 3 years;
- Mandate interventions to reduce the wounding rate (eg regulate a maximum shooting distance);
- Improve hunter education on issues such as humanely dispatching wounded ducks;
- Implement an awareness campaign to bring our native waterbirds to the public's attention and highlight their uniqueness and beauty – the Victorian Discover Ducks! campaign is a good model.

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