

Declining numbers of waterbirds leaves some on threatened list

Survey supports ban

The situation now is worse than when shoots were cancelled in the early 2000s, despite all the rain, writes **FIONA BYRNES**

THE 2022 East Australian Aerial Waterbird Survey — the only long-term scientifically robust data we have to monitor trends in water birds — has reported unambiguously that game duck populations continue to be well below long-term average, some “by order of magnitude”.

The pink-eared duck, hardhead and grey teal declined even further from last year’s survey which in turn saw a 58 per cent decline in game ducks from the previous year. Two “game” duck species are now on the threatened species list. Despite consecutive La Ninas, “game” ducks are not breeding. So much for hunting having “no impact”.

Shooters being unhappy with the bleak picture the EAAWS has been painting for years, demanded a taxpayer-funded “new set of science” in an apparent attempt to find more ducks to shoot.

Despite what shooters say, nowhere in this superfluous “new science” can we see any statement by scientists that holding a recreational bird shoot for a quarter of the year at so many thousands of public waterways across the state they cannot possibly be monitored, is in any way sustainable.

On the contrary, the authors state bird numbers are unknown, cannot be guesstimated at species level, no social/economic impact studies were done and that due diligence in shoot season decisions is recommended.

The problem seems to be the regulator’s lack of that.

Our “independent” hunting regulator has never closed a shooting season despite presiding over the worst conditions recorded. Previous governments cancelled bird shoots in

2003, 2007 and 2008 for less dire circumstances.

Professor Richard Kingsford, who oversees the EAAWS, said in 2015 that “if you have a duck shooting season, you are really only going to be shooting adults, which will reduce the capacity of the population to bounce back”.

His survey in 2022 shows duck numbers are lower now than in 2015, despite all the rain.

To put it bluntly, the science shows our native ducks — many species unique to our country — are in serious trouble. Conservationists want to protect them.

Recreational duck shooting is banned in NSW, Queensland, ACT and Western Australia. In Victoria,

less than half of one per cent of the population shoot ducks — their minority choice of recreation causing much angst to most of the rest of us.

Polls continue to show most Victorians — particularly regional — want the pastime to end. Fears for safety and adverse impacts to mental health are

factors that ought not be overlooked.

But, hey, who better to give the low-down on the health of our native birdlife and rural communities than the shooting fraternity?

• **Fiona Byrnes is Regional Victorians Opposed to Duck Shooting’s director of health and safety**