

Shut up duck

Stefan Bradley

DOWD Morass State Game Reserve is partially closed for duck hunting this season, which began on Wednesday, while the Clydebank Morass State Game Reserve and its adjoining public land has been fully shut down.

The reason cited for the closure of the Clydebank Morass and the adjoining land is to protect the blue-winged shoveler, a threatened species; whereas the partial closure of Dowd Morass near Sale aims to protect breeding waterbirds.

Sale Field & Game spokesman, Gary Howard, criticised the timing of the announcement, which was made mere days before hunting season began.

"They've (the hunters) got to find somewhere else to hunt, right? If you're going to be a responsible hunter, you need to do the research before you go there," Mr Howard told the *Gippsland Times*.

"You just don't turn up at a wetland and say, 'this is where I'm gonna hunt'.

You want to do the work.

"You find out about 3pm on a Sunday afternoon - it doesn't leave a lot of time for that when you've got a Wednesday opening.

"I think it could have been better handled by the relevant government department."

Mr Howard said he had no issue with closures if there was a "genuine need", but questioned whether the research was "robust enough" to justify shutting down certain wetlands.

The state government said it has closed or partially closed 32 wetlands to hunting to prevent losses or disturbance to significant numbers of threatened species and breeding waterbirds.

On Sunday afternoon, the Game Management Authority (GMA), a state government body, attributed the number of wetlands restricted this year as "partly due to an increase in the presence of threatened species currently present at Victorian wetlands".

"The increase in the presence of threatened species is due to favourable

environmental conditions, including extensive flooding in late 2022, resulting in increased waterbird habitat and breeding activity. As wetlands dry, birds are concentrating on remaining wetlands," the GMA wrote.

"Wetlands have been closed to duck hunting to protect significant concentrations of threatened species including the Blue-billed Duck, Blue-winged Shoveler, Freckled Duck, Curlew Sandpiper and Brolga."

Other wetlands have also been closed to prevent disturbance to colonies of breeding waterbirds, and three wetlands (Kow Swamp, Reedy Lakes and Richardson River) are routinely closed each year to reinforce their status as wildlife sanctuaries where game hunting is prohibited.

Signage will be installed to alert hunters to the closures, and wetlands will be monitored throughout the season. If the reason for closure no longer exists, the wetland may be reopened to hunting.

Regional Victorians Opposed to Duck Shooting (RVOTDS) welcomed

the closures, but slammed the state government for not shutting down more waterways, accusing them of "ignoring evidence" put to them.

RVOTDS said they had submitted a list of 26 public duck-shooting sites it requested be closed for a number of reasons. The group claimed that six of these requests had been fully granted and two partially, on the basis of protecting threatened species.

"But Indigenous culture, residents' mental health and wellbeing, public safety, and social/economic impacts have been completely disregarded," RVOTDS said in a statement.

RVOTDS spokesperson, Kerrie Allen said the government had "low regard" for the state's native wildlife and regional communities.

"My question is this. How many tens of thousands of Victoria's public waterways do less than half of one per cent of the population who like to shoot birds, need to be able to shoot on?" she said.

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“AND what is the mental, physical, social and economic cost to everyone else?”

“We are appalled the government is not heeding community feedback, nor taking public health and safety more seriously.”

The GMA says that closing wetlands or regulating hunting methods at wetlands ensures that threatened species are protected and duck hunting remains sustainable.

Other wetlands may be closed or further regulated if significant concentrations of threatened species are found.

Hunters can begin hunting at 8am every day of the season, which began on Wednesday (April 10) and will end on Wednesday, June 5 2024.

Hunting must stop 30 minutes after sunset. The daily bag limit is six game ducks.

The blue-winged shoveler and hardhead is not allowed to be hunted in Victoria this year.

GMA stressed that hunters are responsible for understanding their legal, ethical and safety obligations when hunting, including knowing where it is legal to hunt.

Mr Howard told the Gippsland Times on Wednesday afternoon he believed the first day of hunting had gone well and all obligations were followed.

GMA Game Officers, Victoria Police and Authorised Officers from DEECA, DJSIR and Parks Victoria are patrolling wetlands across Victoria.

Hunters should check the GMA website regularly for updates to wetland closures at gma.vic.gov.au