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The silent decline of Victoria's native quail

VICTORIA's native Stubble Quail can breathe a sigh of relief - momentarily.

The state's annual three-month "recreational" native Stubble Quail shoot ended on June 30.

Compared to our native waterbirds, the plight of our native quail - and the protected species they resemble - has slipped in silence.

Victoria's quail shoot started on April 2, running until the end of June across a plethora of properties - some private, some leased or licensed - as well as unoccupied crown land, state forests, forest parks, and 16 public wildlife reserves around the state.

In most cases the shooters are unmonitored by any authorities.

There is a "probable declining population" of our native Stubble Quail, according to the last Regulatory Impact Statement, a 2012 government document explaining the "rules" of hunting.

But no cancellations of the shooting season have ensued in Victoria, still less reductions in bag limits or season length, despite the record droughts and horrendous fires which devastated wildlife and their habitat.

In a shocking admission, the Game Management Authority (GMA), the taxpayer-funded hunting regulator tasked with ensuring sustainability and minimising the impact of shooting on protected species, recently confirmed to us that no population surveys had been carried out for quail.

In other words, they had no real idea about the little bird's numbers before condemning them to a full three-month shoot of 20 birds a day per shooter.

This year, in its eighth year of operation, GMA started its first-ever trial to estimate Stubble Quail numbers across Victoria (while the shoot continued). Given the involvement of hunt clubs in the count, we expect to see some interesting claims.

We can, however, look to published kill rates to get an idea of quail populations.

Reports show the median kill rate of Stubble Quail per year between 1991 and 2011, was 330,000.

In 2011, there was apparently a record slaughter perhaps as a result of the breaking of the Millennium Drought.

But since 2011, all annual kill rates have been well below 200,000. In fact, if we take out the low kill rate of 2020 (due to COVID-19), the median since 2011 has been just 130,000, less than half what it used to be.

Clearly there is something wrong. Numbers of these quirky little birds, like many other native species in our state, appear to be in an alarming free-fall.

It gets worse.

CSIRO recommended the quail shooting season run from May to July to avoid breeding periods. But the regulator set the shoot for April to June.

It gets worse, still.

Quail shooters are not tested to see if they can tell one species of quail from another. Two species of quail have "threatened" status. And quail are easily confused with the critically endangered Plains-Wanderer, for which taxpayers are funding an extinction prevention program.

In 2020, GMA knowledge tests showed that bird shooters have the lowest knowledge of hunting laws compared to other hunters.

What could possibly go wrong when shooting from a distance, often in poor light conditions?

Sadly, it gets even worse. In 2018 the CSIRO published a paper about the dangerous use of toxic lead ammunition, which is inexplicably legal in shooting quail (and other animals).

A shotgun cartridge contains hundreds of pellets, but only a few might hit a target. So where do the rest go?

According to a Department of Sustainability & Environment report, each ammunition cartridge holds 30-45g of lead. Multiply 30g by the average number of 155,000 shot

quail each year in Victoria (GMA harvest estimate 2009-2021) and one gets a staggering five tonnes of lead potentially pumped into Victorian (including food-producing) environments each season - without taking into account the additional lead deposited by missed shots.

Lead is extremely dangerous even in tiny traces. It takes decades to break down, remaining in the environment as a hazard to animals which ingest it such as birds mistaking it for grit, or secondary predators feeding on shot or lead poisoned animals. Leadshot is a leading cause of mortality in eagles.

This insidious substance also plays havoc with immune systems and fertility - another reason bird numbers are plummeting?

Overseas studies have established connections between unsafe blood lead levels in people, and consuming lead contaminated game animals.

Freedom of Information has revealed that some GMA officials - including those who sign off on the hunting recommendations - have been long time holders of recreational bird shooting licences themselves.

We're not surprised. In our view, only a conflict of interest or ineptitude, explains Victoria's native bird shoots, which fly in the face of the Wildlife Act 1975 that aims to protect and conserve wildlife, prevent extinctions and promote sustainability of wildlife.

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