

## ***The duck hunting season has only just started but residents across regional Victoria are already furious with hunters.***

**Brittany Carlson, Olivia Condous and Mitch Clarke**

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There has been “carnage” on the first day of the Victorian duck hunting season, with reports of endangered birds being shot from the sky and one resident who is still displaced after losing her home in last year’s floods likening the scenes to “war”.

Regional Victorian residents reported hearing gunshots before the season officially started on Wednesday and endangered birds were found dead.

The Game Management Authority has long copped scrutiny for being soft on enforcing hunting laws and wildlife advocates are “terrified” after the bloody start to the 2023 season.

A black swan fell dead from the sky at Gunbower Creek, near Echuca, less than two hours after the start of the season.

Glenys Mahler said seeing the protected species fall from the sky had left her “shaken and disgusted”.

“It was terrible ... It’s really shaken me up. It’s horrible,” Ms Mahler said.

“Where they’re shooting is a beautiful area with lots of different birds and I’m sure that one way or the other, a lot of them get caught up in the crossfire.”

Residents near Richardsons Lagoon, where ducks were recently found to have lead levels dangerous for human consumption, said a group of about five men fired around 300 shots throughout the morning.

Hunting regulations only allow hunters to kill four birds each per day.

Torrumbarry resident Tuesday Browell, who lives near the lagoon, said locals were “devastated”.

“Many of us are still living in caravans because the floods destroyed our homes- before that we had Covid - and now this.

“This is what we have to put up with every year. I’ve been here 26 years and it’s just carnage.

“It’s like being at war ... they’re shooting towards you, around your house.”

Ms Browell said duck shooters interfered with environmental conservation work that locals were taking part in to save endangered species whose habitats were in the wetlands, such as broad shell turtles that nested in the area.

She also said it was disruptive to farm work.

“We've got dairy farmers and their cows are getting scared, their dogs are running wild and their horses are galloping through the paddocks.”

She was fearful for the upcoming weekend, which would see an influx of shooters coming to the area.

One hunter at Lake Connearre admitted he had breached the daily bag limit, revealing that he shot more than four birds but didn't retrieve them all.

Regional Victorians Opposed to Duck Shooting advocate Kerrie Allen said it was “impossible” to get wetlands closed to hunters, even when there were endangered species present.

The GMA was contacted on Sunday about the number of Broilgas around Lake Linlithgow but advocates say nothing has yet been done to prevent hunting in this area.

This morning shots could reportedly be heard as early as 7.30am - half an hour earlier than the allowed start time - at Anderson's Inlet despite this area being closed to shooters due to the presence of critically endangered orange bellied parrots.

There were also reports of shooting starting before the legal time in Gippsland at Jones Bay.

In the state's west, threatened species such as Hardheads have reportedly been found on Hancocks Lake while a dead floating duck at Walkers Lake which the nearby duck shooter made no attempt to retrieve.

Another shooter was caught failing to retrieve a wounded bird because he couldn't find where the animal had landed, according to Go-Pro footage taken by a duck rescuer.

Under the Game Management Authority's rules, hunters must retrieve all wounded birds or make every possible attempt to find the animal.

But activists argue it's an impossible task to find injured birds that land in the swamplands, with many forced to languish in pain for days.

Geelong duck rescue volunteer Natalie Kopas said activists would patrol the wetlands over the hunting window in search of downed birds.

“If we're not out here there's no one looking after our native wildlife,” she said.

“There's people out here shooting animals for fun. They're wounding animals and not retrieving them, and that's not ok.

“Police and the authorities are managing a water based activity from the shore. The only people who are out there looking after our wildlife are a bunch of volunteers who take time off from work and their lives to do this.”

Meanwhile, despite fears of the endangered orange bellied parrots and threatened freckled ducks at Lake Buloke and Lake Connewarre being caught up in the crossfire, both sites remained open to hunters this season.

Bells Swamp in Central Victoria, where 700 birds died not long ago from Botulism, is closed to the public, yet remains open for hunters.

Ms Allen said leaving the park open for hunting would increase the risk of more birds becoming infested with the disease.

“Birds from nearby wetlands will be frightened by gunfire towards Bells Swamp and become infected, the toxin spores can stay in the sediment for years and be infectious in the right conditions.

“It is dangerous for people or pets to consume infected ducks or fish which can take up to 48 hours to show symptoms.”

A Gippsland business owner who lives near a waterway said she arrived at her house in the afternoon and found chaos.

“(There were) birds flying around everywhere disoriented, one was in our house under the sofa (and the) dog is petrified,” she said.

Hearts Morass in Gippsland was not only found to have ducks with lead levels unsafe for consumption, but wetlands have not been closed to hunters.

Ms Allen said she was “shocked” by how poorly managed the protection of wetland wildlife from shooters was.

“Why do less than one per cent of the population who like to fire shotguns at little birds need to be permitted to do so at countless public sites, so many they can't possibly be monitored?”

The Andrews government earlier this year resisted calls to ban the practice, opting to approve a shortened hunting window with daily bag limits of four birds.

A complete ban on the activity would have brought Victoria into line with Queensland, New South Wales and Western Australia.

Instead, a parliamentary inquiry was established to consider the future of recreational native bird hunting.

Members of that upper house committee on Wednesday toured the Lake Connewarre State Game Reserve to observe the action on opening day.

Shooter Patrick Rollinson said hunting ducks was a sustainable and ethical alternative to meat purchased at a supermarket.

“It feels good to supply your own meat in a humane kind of way,” he said.

Mr Rollinson said rule changes to hunting regulations needed to be based on evidence rather than politics.

“I’m happy to follow rules, but when rules are in place that go against the actual science of hunting, it doesn’t really make sense,” he said.

Already the parliamentary inquiry has received 1700 submissions from community members wanting to have their say about duck hunting.

Committee chair Ryan Bachelor said the duck hunting debate had long divided the community.

“Duck hunting is clearly a contentious issue here in Victoria,” he said.

Shooters, Fishers and Farmers MP Jeff Bourman said there was no justification for a ban on the activity.

“Duck hunting in Victoria is one of the most regulated activities that you can possibly do,” he said.

“The people that hunt ducks keep these wetlands in its pristine state, and you won’t find that from the so-called rescuers.”

But Animal Justice Party MP Georgie Purcell said this season must be the last.

“It’s time that we ban it. It’s disgracefully cruel,” she said.

“We like to call ourselves the progressive state but we’re not for as long as this continues.”

The shortened season began at 8am on Wednesday and will close 30 minutes after sunset on May 30.

The Game Management Authority was contacted for comment.