

Big tick for hunters

By Peter Bannan

pbannan@theguardian.com.au

AN anti-duck-hunting group says it's "ludicrous" for the recreational sport's regulator, Game Management Authority, to "hazard a guess" at compliance statistics from this year's season.

"Authorities only monitor around 1 per cent of public hunting areas," Regional Victorians Opposed to Duck Shooting spokesperson Kerrie Allen said.

"They simply wouldn't know (the compliance data).

"Regional residents around the state complained of shooting outside legal times, but the regulator failed to address them.

"It seems clear this year the authorities were more focused on rescuers' behaviour than hunters."

In the final compliance data for the season, which ran from April 10 to June 5, GMA said it conducted 511 waterway and wetland patrols on private and public land across Victoria, including in Gannawarra Shire.

Authorised officers checked more than 1550 game licences and inspected more than 1200 hunter bags.

A total of 56 breaches were detected.

GMA will issue 22 infringement notices and is conducting 32 investigations.

Twenty-six hunting-related offences were detected, with the main offences being an invalid game licence, being in possession of toxic shot and failing to leave a wing attached.

Twenty-three people were suspected of breaching public safety laws by entering or remaining in a specified hunting area or hindering or harassing hunters.

As a result, the GMA issued 22 banning notices. No breaches for over-bagging were detected.

Asked if it was disappointing to see breaches by protesters, Ms Allen said the organisation couldn't comment on whether anti-hunters broke the law.

"We did not witness this," she told *The Guardian*.

"We were concerned to hear that authorities were entering a private property without the landowners' permission, and refusing to leave when asked by the landowner, to arrest rescuers who happened to be on that property," she said.

"Our understanding is this is illegal behaviour by the authorities."

RVOTDS called for a "vast" reduction in the number of public areas open to hunters.

"We are also calling for an increase in hunter licence fees (currently cheaper than a round of beers), so that taxpayers are not burdened with subsidies for compliance monitoring and bird counts," Ms Allen said.

"In a cost-of-living crisis it's inexcusable for the government to be spending millions of taxpayer dollars on a minority recreation, and one which most Victorians oppose, in fact a recreation which locks out other more popular and financially beneficial recreations from vast swathes of public land."

"Bird watching brings over \$3 billion to Australia. What subsidies are being given to encourage birdwatchers in this state?"

In a statement, GMA chief executive Graeme Ford said the majority of people involved in the 2024 duck season acted safely and responsibly.

"While some people breached game hunting and public safety laws, most of the people our authorised officers spoke with were complying with the law," Mr Ford said.

However, there was an increase in the number of suspected breaches to public safety laws detected.

"Public safety laws are in place to provide a safe environment for all land users," Mr Ford said.

"While those who oppose duck hunting have a right to protest, they must do so safely and legally."

Seven non-hunters are also being investigated for hindering or obstructing an authorised officer.

Hunting conservation group Field & Game Australia said hunters "contributed to a safe and regulated hunting environment, demonstrating that hunters are reasonable, responsible people".

"Once again we see that hunters' conduct has been put under a microscope, and once again it has been found to be commendable," FGA chief executive Lucas Cooke said.

Mr Cooke said while hunting-related offences were "concerning and must be addressed", compliance with bag limits was 100 per cent.

FGA said it remained committed to promoting responsible hunting and ensuring a safe and enjoyable experience for all participants.

GMA declined to respond directly to claims made by RVOTDS, but said GMA officers were authorised to conduct compliance activities "across all land tenures".

"All allegations of illegal hunting that are provided to the GMA are referred to the GMA's Intake and Assessment Panel for review and assessment," it said in a statement to *The Guardian*.

"The Intake and Assessment Panel determines any additional action, including if a formal investigation is warranted.

"Where there is sufficient evidence of hunting, animal welfare or public safety offences, hunters and protesters can be prosecuted or issued with infringement notices."