

Should duck hunting be banned across Australia?

What they said...

'Regardless of the reduced season length... approximately 87,000 birds will be killed during the 2023 Victorian duck hunting season and up to 35,000 wounded and left to die.'

Dr Liz Walker, the chief executive officer of RSPCA Victoria

'If I choose to eat a wild duck rather than a chicken from the supermarket, on average I'd bet the duck is likely to have suffered the least.'

John Kentish, a member of the Conservation and Hunting Alliance of South Australia (CHASA)

The issue at a glance

On February 24, 2023, the Victorian government announced that the state's annual duck hunting season would open on April 26 and end on 30 May, with a bag limit of four birds a day.

The Victorian government has also announced that it will establish a legislative council select committee to examine recreational native bird hunting in Victoria. [↗](#)

Conservationists have criticised the government's decision to allow duck hunting in 2023, while duck hunters have reacted adversely to the season being nearly a month shorter than the 2022 season and allowing fewer birds to be shot per day.

On January 17 it was announced that South Australia's duck hunting season would begin on March 18 and close on Sunday, June 25, making it five weeks longer than the Victorian season. [↗](#) However, on January 23, 2023, South Australia's Environment Minister, Susan Close, announced the government would call a review into duck hunting in the state. [↗](#)

The continuation of duck hunting in south-eastern mainland Australia is about to be re-examined. Hunting organisations and conservationists are marshalling their arguments in readiness to make submissions to the Victorian and South Australian governments.

Background

Much of the information contained below has come from the website of the Victorian Game Management Authority. This can be accessed at [↗](#)

The information regarding Australian game birds can be accessed at Field and Game Australia. [↗](#)

Duck hunting is legal in Victoria, South Australia, Tasmania, and the Northern Territory for a specified hunting season each year.

In *Victoria, South Australia and Tasmania* hunters are required to pass a Waterfowl Identification Test (WIT) before being permitted to hunt ducks. This test is intended to ensure that all licensed duck hunters can adequately identify game and non-game waterbirds while in the field.

Bird species that can normally be hunted during open seasons.

Victoria

Blue-winged Shoveler, Grey Teal, Chestnut Teal, Hardhead, Mountain Duck, Pacific Black Duck, Pink-eared Duck, Wood Duck and Stubble Quail

Tasmania

Grey Teal, Chestnut Teal, Wood Duck, Pink-eared Duck, Black Duck, Mountain Duck, Blue-winged Shoveler, Hardhead and Stubble Quail

South Australia

Grey Teal, Chestnut Teal, Wood Duck, Pink-eared Duck, Black Duck, Mountain Duck, Blue-winged Shoveler, Hardhead and Stubble Quail

Northern Territory

Magpie Goose, Black Duck, Water Whistling Duck, Grass Whistling Duck, Grey Teal, Pink-eared Duck, Hardhead and Wood Duck

To remain sustainable, game harvest levels must not exceed the annual rate of production. There are several mechanisms that can be used to regulate harvest levels, including season length, bag limits, number of hunters and the times and places where hunting can occur. In Victoria, the most commonly applied harvest regulators are season length and bag limits, but in certain instances, tighter controls are used to achieve particular management objectives. Hunting is timed to be outside the breeding and moulting seasons. Most ducks in south-eastern Australia breed in spring and then become flightless, moulting, and renewing their feathers.

Despite the management measures habitually applied, conservationists argue that duck numbers in south-eastern Australia are in long-term decline. A major factor contributing to reduced numbers, as with all species in all areas of the world, is habitat loss. Many of the rivers of the Murray-Darling no longer flood as frequently or extensively as they used to. This limits feeding and breeding habitats for ducks: less wetland means fewer ducks. Recently, unusual flood activity in New South Wales has been claimed to pose a different set of threats to waterbird populations. [↗](#)

Each year, the three state governments that generally allow duck hunting decide whether to declare the duck season open on conservation grounds. They use long-term aerial surveys, rainfall, flooding indicators and surveys of wetlands. They also collect data after the event, surveying the numbers and species shot each year - the 'bag' surveys.

Internet information

On March 29, 2023, Game and Field issued a media release titled 'ARI game duck abundance estimates released'

The media release announces the issuing of the Arthur Rylah Institute (ARI) for Environmental Research's official report into abundance estimates for game ducks in Victoria.

The media release gives details of the report and concludes by noting that other estimates, (including those on which the Victorian government has based its restrictions on the 2023 duck hunting season) are likely to be conservative.

The full text can be accessed at [↗](#)

On March 25, 2023, The Border Watch published a news report titled 'Duck hunting row continues'.

The report details accusations made by the RSPCA's South Australian branch that wounded birds were retrieved and killed inhumanely by hunters at Lake George in Beachport. The report includes details of the accusations, a defence offered by a Field and Game representative and a detailed discussion of the different means of killing injured ducks recommended in Victoria and South Australia.

The full text can be accessed at [↗](#)

On March 23, 2023, Game and Field posted an instructional piece outlining the methods recommended for killing injured ducks in Tasmania, South Australia, Victoria and the Northern Territory.

This material was released in response to media claims that there is 'some confusion on acceptable ways to humanely dispatch a bird in the different states and territories.'

The full text can be accessed at [↗](#)

On March 5, 2023, AAP published a news report titled 'Duck shooting battle shifts to Victorian parliament'

The report gives preliminary details of the establishment of a committee of inquiry into duck hunting in Victoria. The report quotes stakeholders on both sides of the debate.

The full text can be accessed at [↗](#)

On March 1, 2023, Animals Australia posted online a series of arguments against duck hunting in Australia. The feature is titled 'Duck shooting: cruel and dangerous for Australian wildlife' and subtitled 'Waterbirds and other wildlife continue to suffer in three Australian states for the sake of shooter'

"recreation". The post examines the suffering inflicted, the inadequacy of protections and changing community expectations.

The full text can be accessed at [🔗](#)

On February 24, 2023, The Guardian published a news report titled 'Victoria announces shortened duck hunting season amid review of "increasingly contested" practice'

The report gives the dates and conditions to apply for the 2023 Victorian duck seasons and foreshadows an inquiry into the continuation of the sport.

The full text can be accessed at [🔗](#)

On February 24, 2023, ABC News posted a news report titled 'This year's Victorian duck hunting season a disappointment to shooters and animal advocates alike'

The report indicates that the announcement of this year's duck hunting season in Victoria has satisfied neither animal activists nor duck hunters.

The full report can be accessed at [🔗](#)

On February 24, 2023, Field and Game posted a response to the Victorian government's announcement that the duck season in Victoria would be substantially reduced in length and bag limits lowered. The Game and Field response challenges the grounds on which the Victorian government has sought to justify its decision.

The full text can be accessed at [🔗](#)

On January 24, 2023, ABC News published a news report titled 'Future of duck hunting to be reviewed in South Australia, but season will go ahead this year'.

The report details the conditions under which the duck hunting season will operate in South Australia in 2023 and states that there will be a review of the sport's future later in the year.

The full text of the report can be found at [🔗](#)

In January 2023 RSPCA (South Australia) posted arguments against the 2023 duck season in South Australia and invited those who oppose duck hunting to contact their parliamentary representatives.

This material can be accessed at [🔗](#)

In January 2023, in the lead-up to the duck hunting season in south-eastern Australia, PETA (People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals) posted material on their site arguing against duck hunting and calling for it to be banned.

This material titled 'The Truth About Duck Hunting' can be accessed at [🔗](#)

On April 4, 2022, The Shepparton News published a report titled 'The duck hunting debate' which featured detailed arguments from both supporters and opponents of duck hunting.

The full text can be accessed at [🔗](#)

On June 3, 2021, The Guardian published a gallery report of text and pictures titled 'Fowl play: duck hunting struggles to stay afloat in Victoria' which examines the apparent decline of duck hunting in Victoria.

The full text and images can be accessed at [🔗](#)

On January 22, 2021, the Sporting Shooters Association of Australia (SSAA), Victorian branch, published on its website a call for its supporters to begin a campaign to defend duck hunting in Victoria. The Association called on its members to contact their local political representatives and outline the case in favour of duck hunting. The site supplies numerous arguments for its supporters to use.

This campaign site can be accessed at [🔗](#)

On February 10, 2021, the National Shooting Council posted a comment titled 'Duck hunting: time for a more decisive political strategy' outlined its plans to defend duck hunting in south-eastern Australia, arguing that animal activists moves against duck hunting were part of a campaign to see all hunting

banned.

The full text can be accessed at [🔗](#)

On March 2, 2020, Independent Australia published an opinion piece by Peter Wicks titled 'Duck hunting season: When too much dead wildlife isn't enough'

The comment criticises the supposed political motivations of the Victorian government in allowing the 2020 duck hunting season. It also disputes the supposed benefits of the season.

The full text can be accessed at [🔗](#)

On March 15, 2018, The Conversation published an analysis and opinion piece by Siobhan O'Sullivan, Senior Lecturer in Social Policy, at the University of New South Wales. The text is titled 'Why duck shooting season still isn't on the endangered list'

The text analyses the various factors that have shaped government policy around duck shooting.

The full text can be accessed at [🔗](#)

In December 2012, The Australia Institute published a report titled 'Out for a duck: An analysis of the economics of duck hunting in Victoria' The report demonstrates that duck hunting represents no significant benefit to the economies of regional Victoria.

The full text can be accessed at [🔗](#)

Arguments in favour of banning duck hunting

[1. Duck hunting causes birds unnecessary pain and suffering](#)

One of the main reasons critics oppose duck hunting is the cruelty that they claim is inevitably involved. Those who condemn duck hunting object to the pain and suffering inflicted on the hunted ducks.

Critics claim that duck shooting is an imprecise form of hunting which imposes injury and severe distress upon the birds being hunted. Dr Bronwyn Orr, President of the Australian Veterinarian Association (AVA), has claimed that the practice is inhumane and inevitably results in many animals being critically injured and left to die. Dr Orr has noted that the shotgun pellets disperse widely and often inflict wounds that do not result in immediate death. Usually, only those birds aligned with the central cluster of pellets will be fatally injured; birds hit at the perimeter of the shotgun volley may receive pellet injury and survive. [🔗](#) Dr Orr has explained, 'Hunting ducks with shotguns often results in non-fatal injuries, where the birds are hit with the outer cluster of pellets, but not retrieved. This results in an ethical animal-welfare problem, as the bird may live for a number of weeks with a crippling injury, receiving no veterinary treatment.' [🔗](#) The Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (RSPCA) has further explained why many birds are shot without immediately dying from their injuries. Its knowledgebase paper on duck hunting states 'If the bird is flying alone and shot from a relatively close range, a large number of pellets are likely to hit vital organs increasing the chances of causing death rapidly. Death occurs from damage to vital organs, bleeding and shock. However, if a bird is shot at by a hunter from too far away, the pellets will spread further out and, coupled with the reduced pellet velocity, this will result in the wounding of both the target bird and the birds surrounding it, inevitably leading to pain and suffering.' [🔗](#)

It has been noted that if left uncollected, wounded birds can suffer from the disabling effects of the injury, including pain and infection, or thirst or starvation if unable to drink or eat. All of these increase the likelihood of being taken by a predator. Mortality due to crippling may not happen immediately after injury and may take days or weeks before the wounded bird dies from long-term effects. [🔗](#) A study in Victoria reported that up to 33 percent of hunted birds were wounded in shooting, but not retrieved - resulting in crippling injuries such as wing, bill, and leg fractures. A radiographical study spanning 20 years reported that between 6 percent and 19 percent of trapped live ducks (of mixed species) had embedded shot. [🔗](#) The Victorian Game Management Authority has acknowledged the duck wounding rate could be between six and 40 percent. When using the reported total harvest figure of 262,567 ducks from the 2022 season, this equates to between 15,700 and 105,000 ducks being wounded and not killed outright in the 2022 season. [🔗](#)

Referring to the current duck season in Victoria, Dr Liz Walker, the chief executive officer of RSPCA-Victoria, has stated, 'Regardless of the reduced season length, based on a 35-day hunting season approximately 87,000 birds will be killed during the 2023 Victorian duck hunting season and up to 35,000 wounded and left to die.' [↗](#)

Animal suffering is an ongoing problem that critics claim is inevitably associated with duck shooting. Coupled with the large number of wounded birds left to die, critics note that many hunters do not know how to efficiently kill birds that they take wounded from the water. In 2021 the RSPCA's head, Dr Walker, warned, 'We remain very concerned at the high wounding rate and lack of knowledge on how to effectively dispatch a downed duck.' [↗](#) As Animals Australia has noted, 'Some [birds] may drown in the water. Some may be scooped up, but instead of being met with kindness, be injured further and eventually killed at the hands of inexperienced shooters.' [↗](#)

[2. The regulations governing duck hunting are inadequate](#)

Critics of continued duck hunting argue that the game management regulations that are claimed to protect waterfowl during the duck hunting season are inadequate.

There are major criticisms raised about the duck recognition tests that hunters are required to pass before they are given a hunting licence. Duck hunting opponents note the 22 question 'Waterfowl Identification Test'(WIT) only has to be sat once and requires only 75 percent accuracy. There is no requirement that hunters requalify or take refresher training which means it is likely that, over time, hunters, who at most hunt for only three months in any year, will lose the ability to identify birds accurately. Animals Australia has noted, 'Some shooters may not have taken the test for 25 years.' [↗](#) It has also been noted that adolescents and international visitors can legally fire shotguns at waterbirds without demonstrating any knowledge of which species are protected. Research commissioned by the Game Management Authority (GMA) in 2020 relating to hunter knowledge found that when asked about identifying game ducks, only 20 percent of respondents answered correctly. [↗](#)

Critics claim that the inadequacy of the WIT testing requirements has devastating consequences for threatened bird species. Animals Australia has revealed, 'Only weeks into the 2016 duck shooting season, "protected" species were massacred. The same happened again in 2017, with 113 freckled ducks (one of the world's rarest species of waterbird, and Australia's rarest duck species) slaughtered by shooters. 68 of these endangered waterbirds were found dead on the opening weekend of the three-month season.' [↗](#) In the same period, the Coalition Against Duck Hunting collected the carcasses of nearly 450 illegally shot threatened or protected species, including the threatened, blue-billed duck. [↗](#)

The same complaints were made at the start of the duck season in 2022. Wildlife Victoria's chief executive officer, Lisa Palma, has stated, 'Duck shooting is horrendous given the ever-diminishing state of our water bird population and the fact that many of the shooters can't differentiate between one species over another.' In 2022, Palmer led a triage mission to care for injured ducks left at Lake Bael in Kerang, near the New South Wales border. Among the birds Wildlife Victoria found shot were blue-winged shovellers and hardheads or white-eyed duck, both species which the state government had explicitly warned are 'listed as threatened due to declining populations.' [↗](#) The white-eyed duck, is the only true diving duck found in Australia. [↗](#) The regulations also allow hunting 30 minutes before sunrise and 30 minutes after sunset. Critics have argued that the combination of poor bird identification skills and poor visibility mean that many protected species are at risk because hunters are unable to recognise them. [↗](#)

Opponents of duck hunting further argue that duck hunting regulations are inadequate because there is no requirement that hunters be competent shooters. Animals Australia has noted that duck hunters do not have to pass a compulsory shooting accuracy test. The development of an accuracy improvement course for shooters has been funded by taxpayers; however, it has attracted little interest from shooters. In 2018, fewer than one hundred shooters attended the one-day course. That year more than 26,000 duck shooters were licensed for the duck hunting season. [↗](#) A recent report giving the findings of a survey of duck hunters knowledge of their sport found that three out of five hunters did not know how to shoot to minimize wounding and achieve a clean kill. 85 percent did not understand the safety risks associated

with firing at ducks at close-range. [Animals Australia](#) has claimed that many hunters are so unskilled that they 'lack the most basic knowledge when it comes to animal welfare, and risk personal and public safety.'

Finally, critics complain that there are no regulations requiring hunters to learn how to humanly kill wounded birds. For example, in South Australia, the regulations stipulate that shooters must adhere to the Code of Practice for the Humane Destruction of Birds by Shooting in South Australia - but there is no requirement to undertake any training or prove any competency in killing injured birds 'humanely' in order to obtain a shooting licence. [Research](#) commissioned by the Victorian Gaming Management Authority (GMA) in 2020 found that only 13 percent of respondents knew how to kill wounded birds without extending the animals' suffering.

[3. The regulations governing duck hunting are not adequately enforced](#)

Critics of duck hunting claim that the regulations meant to govern the sport are not adequately enforced, either because they are impossible to implement effectively or because the different state gaming management authorities are both promoters and regulators of duck hunting and so are not motivated to properly stamp out abuses.

Numerous instances over many years of flagrant violation of duck hunting regulations have led many critics to claim that the game management authorities are not fit to perform their function. Laurie Levy, head of the Coalition Against Duck Hunting, has claimed for years that the Victorian Game Management Authority is a 'paper tiger', without the will or the capacity to enforce the regulations it is charged with overseeing. Levy has claimed that the Coalition always passes on to the GMA its film footage of hunters violating regulations. He states, 'We always give our footage to the GMA, and you would expect those shooters to be charged. But the GMA always has an excuse about why they won't prosecute - never once has a hunter been prosecuted for animal cruelty.'

It has often been acknowledged that the various game management authorities are under-equipped to enforce the hunting regulations in their different states. The South Australian Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals has stated, 'National Park rangers have the task of monitoring shooters during the South Australian duck shooting season. However, they are not present at all shooting locations when shooters are in action - especially as much of the shooting in South Australia takes place on private land, where no monitoring at all is required.'

Not only animal welfare groups make this point. Some sporting shooter organisations have commented similarly. In 2023, the Sporting Shooters Association of Victoria (SSAA) noted, 'SSAA understands the limitations of the Game Management Authority's (GMA) enforcement capabilities. GMA officers cannot cover every wetland in the state, and we do not expect them to.' However, the SSAA went on to suggest that the Authority could make a greater effort to effectively employ its current resources. The SSAA stated, 'What we do expect is that they make a genuine and concerted effort to stamp out illegal behaviour... Instead of blaming all hunters for illegal behaviour, there needs to be a real enforcement effort to target those doing the wrong thing.'

A recent government commissioned report on the Game Management Authority (GMA) in Victoria found that duck shooting is poorly regulated in Victoria and hunting laws may be impossible to enforce effectively under the current regulatory system. The findings of the report, produced by Pegasus Economics, were first leaked to news outlets in March 2018. The report referred to mass shootings of protected birds and the mass dumping of bird carcasses suggesting a disregard for animal life and that bag limits were often being exceeded. The report concluded 'Non-compliance with the game hunting laws is commonplace and widespread.' The report suggested that there was insufficient distance between the GMA and the hunting associations, so that the regulator was 'vulnerable to capture' by the very interests it was seeking to regulate. It concluded, 'The GMA's inability to ensure compliance with the hunting laws has seriously undermined its credibility as an independent and effective regulator and raises questions about the integrity and sustainability of the regulatory regime.'

The report additionally noted that the GMA's own staff do not believe it can ensure compliance with the hunting laws or effectively punish those who break them. Other criticisms include that the GMA focuses

too much energy on managing protesters instead of policing hunters, that the licensing regime is ineffective and that the GMA sometimes "slides into advocacy and promotional roles that conflict with its responsibilities as a regulator". [↗](#) Animals Australia has summed up these concerns claiming, "The Game Management Authority has a major conflict of interest being simultaneously a promoter and regulator of duck shooting... leaving our precious native wildlife and peaceful regional communities to suffer terribly as a result." [↗](#)

[4. Duck hunting places further strain on native bird populations that are already stressed](#)

Those who argue that duck hunting should be banned across Australia maintain that duck populations are facing many pressures and that hunting adds a major avoidable threat to species' survival.

Critics claim that climate change has resulted in years of rising temperatures and dry conditions that have seriously affected the wetlands that duck species rely on as their habitat. It has also been claimed that land management practices, such as diverting rivers and draining wetlands, have added to habitat loss. [↗](#) This has been acknowledged as an Australia-wide problem. The Australian government's 2022 independent report on the state of the national environment found that 7.7 million hectares of threatened species habitat was destroyed in Australia between 2000 and 2017.' The report further noted, '[Australia has] one of the highest rates of species decline amongst developed countries in the OECD. The report reveals that the list of new threatened species, and species listed in a higher category of threat, has grown by 8 percent since 2016 and... will increase substantially in coming years because of the 2019-20 bushfires.' [↗](#) A 2012 report from the Environment Defenders Office (Victoria) noted, 'At least two thirds of Victoria's wetlands have been lost since settlement, amounting to around 4,000 natural wetlands and 191,000 hectares. Remaining wetlands are threatened by a lack of water, physical change for development, pollution, and poor land management.' [↗](#)

Numerous duck species are currently threatened because of habitat loss, leading critics to argue that recreational hunting is not sustainable. As an instance of duck species' perilous state, a 2003 Department and Sustainability Environment Action Statement regarding the Blue-billed Duck noted, 'There are only 25 wetlands at which more than 100 Blue-billed Ducks have been recorded at any one time in surveys conducted since 1987. Even though the species is rare it has regularly featured in the list of most frequently shot nongame species.'

Another species at risk is the threatened duck which is listed as 'threatened' in Victoria, 'vulnerable and rare' in New South Wales and South Australia, 'likely to become extinct, or is rare' in Western Australia and as 'protected' in Queensland. Despite this, duck hunting in its habitats continues to result in birds being killed. A 2022 Department and Sustainability Environment Action Statement noted, 'Freckled Duck are vulnerable to shooting because flocks, when disturbed, are often reluctant to leave a favoured wetland and because of misidentification...Estimates from surveys indicate that the percentage of Freckled Duck shot.

on samples of waters open to hunting during the opening weekend of the duck hunting season over three years varied from 33 percent in 1988 to 93 percent in 1989. [↗](#) Though duck identification tests have improved these figures the birds are still being shot. In the opening days of the duck hunting season in Victoria in 2017, the bodies of some 450 threatened or protected species were retrieved from duck hunting sites by animal activists. Among these birds were freckled ducks and blue-billed ducks. [↗](#)

Critics argue that all duck species are at risk due to habitat loss and that duck hunting must not continue. In 2021, researchers led by conservation biologist Richard Kingsford recorded the third lowest tally of water bird abundance across the eastern seaboard in almost 40 years of monitoring. Australasian shovelers, they found, now number fewer than 60, compared to thousands just decades ago. [↗](#) Paleocologist Peter Gell argues that government attempts to conserve and restore habitats are incompatible with continued hunting. He has stated, 'It goes against the kind of widespread investment in recovery if we allow duck shooting to continue at the expense of our native fauna.' [↗](#)

[5. The economic benefits of duck hunting are exaggerated](#)

Opponents of duck hunting claim that the supposed economic benefits of this practice are highly exaggerated.

It has been claimed that only a small proportion of the Victorian population, for example, takes part in duck hunting and that the contribution it makes to rural economies is minor. On February 7, 2023, the Victorian branch of the Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (RSPCA-Victoria) noted 'Estimates show that only 11,549 hunters hunted in 2022, meaning only 0.17 percent of the Victorian population is actively participating in duck hunting and a regular season runs for around 12 weeks a year showing that a ban will have negligible impact on the economy due to the extremely limited participation rate.' [↗](#) Although total expenditure by duck shooters may appear significant, critics further note that its actual contribution to both the Victorian economy and the economies of regional areas is small. A 2014 study conducted for the Department of Environment and Primary Industries (DEPI) found 'With a GSP [gross state product] of \$439 million including flow-on effects, the economic impact of hunting activity by game licence holders was estimated to make up 0.13 percent of the Victorian economy. Hunting activity is concentrated in certain areas, with the highest concentration of hunting being [the] Mansfield local government area (LGA) where hunting accounts for 2.5 percent of the LGA's economy.' [↗](#)

Opponents of duck hunting argue that tourism contributes far more to both state and regional economies. The previously cited 2014 study conducted for the Department of Environment and Primary Industries (DEPI) on the impact of duck hunting on the Victorian economy found 'The direct economic impact of the tourism industry in Victoria was estimated to be \$8,650 million in 2011/12, or \$8,970 in today's [2014] dollars. At \$177 million, the direct economic impact of hunting by game licence holders was 2.0% of tourism's direct economic impact.' [↗](#) It has further been noted that duck hunting may actually discourage eco tourists, who form a significant proportion of the tourist market. In a comment released in January 2023, Wildlife Victoria urged the state's Game Management Authority (GMA) 'to consider the negative impact on domestic and international tourism, and the damage duck hunting has on Victoria's cultural and environmental reputation.' Wildlife Victoria further stated, 'The economic benefits of birdwatching and wildlife tourism are well documented and provide compelling evidence for ending duck hunting.' [↗](#) The lobby group Regional Victorians Opposed to Duck Shooting has stated, "'Birding" is cited as one of the fastest growing past times in the world. Typically, "birders" are affluent, well-educated tourists who "stay longer and spend more", in places they visit. Our rural cafes, shops, wineries and B&B's to name a few, could significantly benefit from this.' [↗](#)

Numerous regional tourist businesses have expressed concern regarding the negative impact of the annual Victorian duck hunting season on regional tourism. In a letter published in The Age on September 4, 2022, Mae Adams, owner-manager of the Venus Bay Eco Retreat has written, 'Duck shooting has no benefit to regional Victoria and is threatening the much more viable and sustainable nature tourism sector. Water bird populations have been in decline for years, and it is time for Victorian Labor to stop cruel duck shooting permanently.' [↗](#)

It has further been argued that were duck hunting banned, those who participate in this interest are likely to take up other outdoor activities and the expenditure associated with these other activities would compensate for what would be lost because of the duck hunting ban. A 2012 review of the economic impact of duck hunting in Victoria, conducted by the Australian Institute, concluded 'Claims that duck hunting - or any recreational hunting - contributes significantly to the economy of Victoria are false. They assume that without hunting any related expenditure would be lost to Victoria. On the contrary, our survey shows that if duck hunters were prevented from hunting ducks they would go fishing, hunt other species, or go camping. There would be no impact on expenditure in Victoria from a duck hunting ban.' [↗](#)

Arguments against banning duck hunting

[1. Duck hunting is ecologically beneficial](#)

Those who support the continuation of duck hunting in Australian states and territories argue that hunters and their associations help to preserve the ecology and promote the survival of duck species through their contributions to habitat conservation.

Sporting Clays Association Australia (a subdivision of Shooting Australia) states that one of its primary objectives is 'to preserve, restore, develop, and maintain waterfowl habitat in Australia.' The Association further claims, 'Waterfowl hunters are aware of the importance of our wetlands and the wildlife they hold and have traditionally been [at] the forefront of wetland conservation, often being the first to notice changes in waterfowl population and seek reasons for them.' [↗](#) The same claims are made by Field & Game Australia which has further noted, 'Field & Game Australia has been involved in many long and difficult efforts to save wetlands in Australia for the hundreds of species which depend wholly or partly upon wetland habitats for their survival. Many of the efforts have been predominately aimed at non-game species, especially the Glossy Ibis *Plegadis falcinellus* and the Brolga *Grus rubicundus*. Some of the wetlands that have benefitted from hunter-led conservation since 1958 include: Hird Swamp (Ramsar-listed, part of the Kerang Wetlands), Johnson Swamp (Ramsar-listed, part of the Kerang Wetlands), Dowd Morass (Ramsar-listed, part of the Gippsland Lakes), Reedy Lake (Nagambie), Kanyapella Basin (near Echuca), Lake Borrie (Ramsar-listed, part of the Port Phillip Bay Western Shoreline, and Bellarine Peninsula), Reedy Lake (Geelong - Ramsar-listed, part of the Port Phillip Bay Western Shoreline, and Bellarine Peninsula), Macleod Morass (near Bairnsdale) [and] Hospital Swamp (Geelong)... Many of these wetlands have long-term, ongoing conservation work performed by hunters, as these important wetland habitats require active maintenance and monitoring to ensure that the wetland ecosystems remain balanced and able to support a wide variety of flora and fauna.' [↗](#)

In addition to duck hunters' direct conservation efforts, supporters note that the licence fees hunters pay contribute to the establishment and maintenance of waterfowl reserves. Sporting Clays Australia has noted that duck hunting groups actually lobbied state governments that they be charged licence fees so that the governments could spend the money on wetland maintenance. The Association states, 'This raises more than \$1.5 million dollars every year across Australia, much of which is channeled into wetland conservation projects and wetland purchase and lease agreements.' [↗](#) Kev Gommers, Secretary of the Victorian Duck Hunters' Association, has stated in relation to wildfowl reserves in Victoria, '[Past] governments...used the money raised from selling duck stamps toward purchasing nearly 200 state game reserves. These are a bastion of refuge for all animals which live there.' It has been suggested that if duck hunting were banned, many of these reserves might be sold to developers as agricultural or residential land.

It has further been noted that if ducks were not valued by regional communities as a game bird, many local farmers would see them exclusively as pests and the numbers shot are likely to be at least as great as currently, without the habitat conservation work that duck hunting currently promotes. In 2010, Associate Professor Graham Hall, School of Animal Studies, The University of Queensland, warned, 'If ducks have no value to hunters and landowners, their occupation of land, pollution of water and consumption of vegetation assumes increased economic significance. In this context, some duck species may be considered "pests". If pest mitigation is the only way to hunt ducks, it may create incentives to promote their pest status, exactly the opposite of what is needed to drive and expand habitat conservation efforts. Perhaps more important, when ducks are hunted as pests, as in New South Wales, there are no requirements for hunter's codes of practice, closed or open seasons, population monitoring, incentives to conserve habitats or any of the other benefits that come from regulated hunting seasons.' [↗](#)

In an opinion piece written by Sale Field and Game and published in The Gippsland Times on January 27, 2023, it was stated, 'Harvesting a naturally sustainable, renewable, free-range source of meat, which was raised on land otherwise unsuitable for agriculture or food production, and which benefits the wider ecosystem as a whole, seems like the best choice to duck hunters.' [↗](#)

[2. Duck hunting is carefully regulated to ensure that hunting is safe, humane, and only approved game species are hunted](#)

Supporters of duck hunting argue that the sport is highly regulated to ensure it is practised in a way that is safe, humane, and sustainable.

All duck hunters require a firearm licence. To obtain a firearm licence applicants must be residents of or work within the state where they are applying. They must be 18 years and over for an adult licence, or,

between 12 and 18 years for a junior licence. They must be deemed a 'fit and proper person'. Applicants may fail to be deemed a 'fit and proper person' if they have a history of mishandling firearms; have a criminal record which suggests their unsuitability to receive a firearms licence; have a record of physical or mental illness which medical evidence suggests should exclude them from owning or using firearms; have a record of drug or alcohol misuse which medical advice suggests should exclude them from owning or using a firearm and/or have failed to possess sufficient knowledge and competency in the carriage and use of firearms (that is, they have not completed or failed the relevant state firearms safety course.) [↗](#)

In Victoria, South Australia and Tasmania hunters are required to pass a Waterfowl Identification Test (WIT) before being permitted to hunt ducks. This ensures that all licensed duck hunters can adequately identify game and non-game waterbirds while in the field. [↗](#) In Victoria, the test consists of 22 multiple-choice questions. The test is viewed as a video, and applicants have 20 minutes to complete all 22 multiple-choice questions. A species of waterfowl is viewed for approximately five seconds and hunters must select the correct waterbird species and its hunting status before moving to the next question. A score of 85 percent or greater will be required to obtain a pass (that is, 57 out of 66), provided that the applicant also correctly identifies all non-game species. [↗](#) All hunters must leave a fully-feathered wing on any harvested duck until immediately prior to cooking or until the duck has been taken to the person's ordinary place of residence. This allows Authorised Officers to quickly and accurately identify all waterfowl in a hunter's possession. [↗](#)

To further public safety during duck hunting seasons there are regulations that control the behaviour of non-hunters (often protesters and animal rights activists). For example, in Victoria, it is an offence for an unauthorised person to enter or remain in specified duck hunting wetlands at certain times throughout the duck season. These times are those considered to present the highest risk of accidental injury occurring to hunter or non-hunter, such as from midnight on the opening day of the duck season until 10:00 am on that day. It is also an offence for an unauthorised person to approach within 10 metres of a person who is carrying a firearm or actively hunting ducks in specified hunting areas during the duck season. [↗](#)

Steps are taken to ensure that hunting is allowed only when conditions do not endanger species. Hunting is allowed only in designated hunting seasons and the duration of these adjusted to suit environmental conditions and estimated bird numbers. Australia routinely experiences variable climatic and environmental conditions. This sees much of the country undergo flood or drying conditions. Game duck species respond quickly to environmental conditions which will see their populations boom during good climate and breeding conditions and then wane during average conditions. When conditions permit, duck season in the south-eastern states runs for three months from March to June. [↗](#) Specific hunting areas may be closed, and hunting seasons may be cancelled if conditions and bird numbers are considered to make that necessary. Standard bag limits may be reduced and the hours per day during which hunting is allowed may be lowered.

Hunters are required to hunt ethically and humanely in a manner which is respectful of their quarry. This includes shooting only when you can retrieve your quarry; shooting only when a humane result is possible; using the right equipment to effectively and humanely hunt animals; humanely dispatching downed birds and caring appropriately for hunting dogs. Shooters are also required to hunt safely and abide by the Firearms Safety Code; always hunt within the law and report illegal behaviour; and uphold the highest ethical standards. [↗](#)

Hunters are also required to respect the natural environment. This includes taking all litter (including empty cartridges) away with them; protect wetlands and waterways (for example, not leaving animal remains in or near waterways); and taking part in efforts to protect and restore wildlife habitats. [↗](#)

[3. The surveys used to estimate duck numbers are not sufficiently accurate](#)

Duck hunters claim that surveys used to estimate duck populations and as a basis for setting bag limits and the length of hunting seasons are not sufficiently precise. They further claim that such figures cannot be used to decide whether duck hunting should continue in Australia.

In an opinion piece published in The Gippsland Times on January 27, 2023, Sale Field and Game explain that 'The Eastern Australian Waterbird Survey (EAWS) is a long-running annual survey, which is now overseen by the University of New South Wales, and 2023 marks the 41st year of continuous data gathering.' The writers praise the survey's value as a general index of ecological health; however, they claim it is not an appropriate instrument to gauge bird populations in general or in areas that have not been surveyed. They state, 'A decrease in the number of ducks counted on the wetlands surveyed does not mean there are fewer ducks in Australia. It only means there were fewer ducks in the wetlands the survey covered (which were limited).' [🔗](#) Kev Gommers, Secretary of the Victorian Duck Hunters Association, has noted, 'The Eastern Australian Waterbird Aerial Survey this year found only 38 grey teal nationwide. Yet I see pictures and videos of thousands of them.' Critics argue that some animal activists improperly use the survey data to make 'claims that... low count numbers are indicative of population declines, and [reduced breeding] - again discounted by...survey data which showed the measure of breeding birds (breeding indices) as being the second highest on record.' [🔗](#)

It has been claimed that survey data this year is likely to be particularly suspect as floods have dramatically increased the number of breeding areas available to waterfowl. It is being suggested that this increased terrain suitable for breeding has meant that bird numbers are likely to be down in some surveyed areas because the birds are more widely dispersed. Sale Field and Game have stated, 'The lack of ducks...is indicative of a huge amount of available habitat this year that is not in the survey area - and when ducks are breeding, they are generally scarce as far as being able to be counted from a passing aeroplane.' [🔗](#)

The impact of increased breeding over a wider area has been explained by Field & Game Australia, which argues that the survey is currently an even less reliable indicator of duck number. Field and Game Australia has noted, 'Eastern Australia received near-record rainfall in 2022, boosting wetland habitat and nesting vegetation. Waterbird breeding as recognised in the EAAWS was at near record highs... From the air it's easy to see nests in trees and rookeries on islands; but ducks in tree hollows, under lignum bushes and in thick foliage are not so easy to spot.' [🔗](#)


Sale Field and Game has also pointed out that the inevitable shortcomings of the counting process as influenced by breeding locations. They have stated, 'Ducks respond very quickly to the ideal conditions created by flooding and spread out across the landscape to make the most of the abundant food and good nesting habitat. In dry times, they concentrate back onto the waterways and are easier to count - but this doesn't mean there are more ducks in droughts than in floods...' [🔗](#)


Hunting associations have called on governments to use a more appropriate tool to determine whether duck hunting seasons should go ahead, how long they should be and what bag limits should be set. The Sporting Shooters Association of Australia (SSAA) is calling on governments to adopt a scientifically controlled season predictor such as the Waterfowl Conservation Harvest Model (WCHM), which would look at all factors affecting game bird numbers. The SSAA Victoria's Hunting Development Manager, David Laird, has noted, 'The WCHM would enable decisions about such things as bag limits each Duck Season to be based on science and not politics or emotion. We are encouraging decision-makers to commit to a regulated season and bag limits for a period of five years while a WCHM-type system is implemented.' [🔗](#)


[4. Duck hunting is economically advantageous for rural and regional areas](#)



Supporters of duck hunting argue that the sport makes an important contribution to rural and regional economies.


The economic benefits of hunting as a whole are substantial. In 2019, RG Consulting Group compiles a report which found that Australia's hunters and shooters contributed \$2.4 billion to the economy in 2018. The report claimed the benefits included \$800 million in direct spending and \$1.6 billion in flow-on economic activity. It said if hunting was prohibited, some expenditure would be redirected to similar activities 'such as camping, fishing, four-wheel driving', but that recreational hunting made a net contribution of \$335 million and added 3,300 jobs in the previous year. [🔗](#) The report, much of which was

extrapolated from Victorian figures, found that hunters are generally male, more likely to be in full time employment and have higher incomes than the average Victorian. Hunters took an average of six hunting trips during 2019 and that many hunters participate in other outdoor activities such as camping, target shooting, fishing and four-wheel driving.  Thus hunters were found to be recurrent visitors to regional areas who had above average disposable income. 23 percent of hunters had incomes greater than \$156,000 compared with 14 percent of the general population of Victorians. This makes them a valuable additional consumer base in regional areas.

The economic activity associated with recreational game hunting occurred across Victoria. Most of the expenditure was outside Melbourne, with 69 percent located in regional Victoria. The Local Government Areas with the highest gross economic contribution were Mansfield (\$12M), East Gippsland (\$11M) and Latrobe (\$11M). The towns with the highest hunting-related expenditure were Mansfield (\$21M), Horsham \$11M), Wodonga (\$10M) and Bendigo (\$9M). 


The contribution of hunting to the Australian economy is relatively high as it tends to be expenditure that is not focused on imported goods. Expenditures made on recreational hunting trips include only a small number of imports as much occurs at businesses in Australia selling Australian services (i.e., restaurants, accommodation, and vehicle repairs). The same is true of spending on other outdoor activities. This makes hunting activities a direct contributor to employment in Australia. 

Hunting as a boost to rural and regional economies is potentially very important as most regional areas are facing long-term decline. Over the past 20 years, the average earnings of those living in regional areas has been 20 percent below that of those living in cities.  What has continued to occur is the steady shift of productive work to the cities and away from rural and regional areas. Agriculture and manufacturing, two industries that drove the economy in the 20th century, both required the cheap and abundant land that regional and suburban areas offered. The decline of these industries has seen a steady shift towards the city as the dominant economic force in Australia.  Supporters of hunting (including duck hunting) claim that for those struggling to make a livelihood in regional and rural Australia, the influx of expenditure brought by hunters is an input they are ill-equipped to lose.

Some of the indirect economic benefits derived from the sport of hunting include the higher level of physical fitness exhibited by most hunters. The RG Consulting Group report found that hunters engaged in more physical activity and had 'higher levels of wellbeing' when compared to the general population. The then Agriculture Minister Bridget McKenzie stated, 'It is important for governments and the community to have a solid evidence base about the social, economic and wellbeing benefits of shooting and hunting - just as it is for any other sport.' 

[5. Duck hunting fosters environmental awareness and has human beings actively participating in the food chain](#)

Supporters of duck hunting argue that the practice increases the environmental awareness of those who take part. They further claim that hunters are actively participating in the food chain in which all creatures, including human beings, form a part.

Supporters of duck hunting claim that those who participate in this sport develop an appreciation of the environment and of ecological pressures on native species. Geelong Field and Game has sought to explain how its members acquire an acute awareness of their environment and seek to preserve it. The group states, 'Hunters are different. They are outdoors people, with an innate curiosity that draws them to explore the natural world around them. Whether hunting or not, they are keen observers of weather, environmental conditions, water, plant life and especially bird life. They will spend time observing and studying, for them, the [Barwon] Estuary is a lifelong classroom you keep attending to build knowledge and understanding.' 

The group has further explained how its members and members of other regional field and game clubs have worked to preserve the habitats of the birdlife they hunt. John Long, a former president of Geelong Field and Game, has explained the work he has personally been involved in for over fifty years. He states,

'We hunt ducks for 12 weeks a year, but we spend the rest of the time on conservation projects, I spend six months of the year hunting foxes [which do damage to native species] ... The place [the Barwon Estuary] was in a terrible mess at various times, there were car bodies and rubbish dumped there, we planted trees by the thousands and put in nest boxes. We have maintained it to be a pretty pristine waterway.' [↗](#)

Those who support duck hunting further argue that duck hunters are participating in an activity that all carnivores rely upon either directly through their own efforts or indirectly through purchasing fish and meat which has been cultivated and slaughtered by others. Duck hunters regard this as a natural process that merely underlines human beings place within the food chain. They also claim that killing one's own food is no more brutal or unethical than relying on meat that comes from slaughtered domestic animals.

In an article published in the Shepparton News on April 4, 2022, Nick Dean, the president of the Echuca-Moama Field and Game Club, stated, 'Duck hunting is no different to deer hunting or to fishing. To use the phrase hunter-gatherer, we are out providing for the table.

I often say to people, where do you think the food comes from at the supermarket? That lamb roast that you're having for Sunday lunch was a baby lamb running around the paddock at some point. It's food, and that's why we're out there doing it because we enjoy eating wild duck.' [↗](#) In a recently published letter, Mark Fabris, of the Conservation and Hunting Alliance of South Australia (CHASA), similarly wrote, 'If as a society, we eat meat how can we justify banning hunting your own food? Carried out ethically it has no negative impact on duck numbers or the environment.' [↗](#) John Kentish, another member of CHASA, has also argued, 'We should remember that all human interaction with animals in our food production systems inevitably involves some degree of animal suffering, including handling, transport, captivity, castration, veterinary procedures, pest control such as myxomatosis etc. For those who are intimate with reality, duck hunting clearly falls within an acceptable range of suffering when harvesting this abundance of healthy wild food.

If I choose to eat a wild duck rather than a chicken from the supermarket, on average I'd bet the duck is likely to have suffered the least!' [↗](#) In March 2023, Jeff Bourman, Upper House Victorian Member of Parliament (from the Shooters, Fishers, and Farmers Party) noted, 'People who happily eat farmed duck are brainwashed into thinking duck hunting is somehow cruel, yet farmed ducks being killed is not. It's cognitive dissonance of epic proportions.' [↗](#)

Further implications

It appears that duck hunting is likely to be banned within Victoria and perhaps in South Australia within the next decade. There are three primary drivers behind this. Firstly, public support for the activity is in steady decline and secondly, the number of people shooting ducks is falling. Finally, underlying the above trends, popular support for animal wellbeing is also increasing.

Declining support for duck hunting is evident in both Victoria and South Australia. Victoria, as the region with the greatest number of wetlands, is the principal duck-hunting state in Australia. However, statistics from Victoria reveal the lack of wide-spread support for the sport. Different survey results show that between 68 and 87 percent of Victorians want the practice banned. [↗](#) It has also been noted that very few Victorians take part in duck hunting. A 2014 Australia Institute survey revealed that less than half of one percent of Victorians were active duck hunters. [↗](#) Further, the number of people hunting ducks appears to be in decline. Estimates suggest only 11,549 hunters hunted in 2022, meaning only 0.17 percent of the Victorian population is now actively participating in duck hunting. [↗](#) The situation is similar in South Australia, where a 2020 poll found that nearly 75 percent of those surveyed supported a ban on duck and quail hunting. [↗](#) The number of duck hunters is also low in Tasmania where BirdLife Tasmania estimates that there were just over 1,100 active duck hunters - about 0.2 percent of the Tasmanian population. However, despite the low participation rate, there appears to be greater community support for hunting in Tasmania. Thus, the Tasmanian government has no plans to ban recreational duck hunting and claims that recent surveys of wildfowl populations have not raised any new concerns. [↗](#) Prior to their re-election in

May 2021, the Tasmanian government pledged to 'Continue to protect the Tasmanian tradition of recreational hunting and sporting shooting which is a way of life for many Tasmanian families.' [↗](#)

Popular opinion in Victoria and South Australia appears to have shifted away from support for duck hunting in part because of changing demographics. The urbanisation rate in Australia, always high, is becoming greater. Since the 1960s, Australia's urbanisation rate has consistently been above 80 percent, and in 2021 it has reached its highest ever rate at 86.36 percent. Historically, Australia has been one of the most urbanised countries in the world, due to high rates of immigration since the 20th century, with new arrivals generally settling in coastal and urban areas. [↗](#) Carmen McCleod, Research Fellow at the University of Otago, New Zealand, has stated, 'To most individuals, living in urbanised and industrialised societies...killing animals has become an unfamiliar process, making it hard to grasp why hunters choose to shoot animals when there is no longer a dependence on wild animals for food-particularly when meat can be purchased from a supermarket conveniently packaged and "de-animalised.'" [↗](#) Rural areas are traditionally more supportive of hunting practices as shooting wild and domestic animals and slaughtering livestock are established elements of farm management. Thus, as a greater proportion of Australians live in cities and suburbs, support for and the practice of hunting has declined.

Interestingly, however, support for duck hunting is also declining in regional areas. In research conducted by Kantar Public, of metropolitan residents 68 percent are opposed to duck hunting; however, 60 percent oppose it in regional Victoria. This suggests an attitude change in areas that have traditionally supported duck hunting. [↗](#) Here, opposition to duck hunting seems to indicate that urbanisation is also affecting rural areas. Kerrie Allen from Regional Victorians Opposed to Duck Shooting notes the overwhelming feedback her group received when surveying people in duck shooting locations was about 'fears for safety, pellets landing on people's roofs which collect their water supply, horses going through fences, children were traumatised'. Duck shooting, she said, is happening less than 30 metres from some back doors. [↗](#)

The primary reason for opposing duck hunting appears to be concern for the wellbeing of the animals that are hunted. International research has suggested an increasing concern among most developed countries for animal welfare. An article published on March 16, 2020, in Psychology Today, has argued that this is linked to a growing awareness of animal sentience, that is, the capacity of animals to feel pain. [↗](#) It is interesting to note that the pain inflicted on hunted animals is often the first argument offered by groups against hunting. In its opposition to duck hunting in Australia, People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA) argues, 'Every year in Victoria, around 300,000 water birds are blasted out of the sky, all for the sake of "sport". For each bird killed outright, another is wounded and left to die slowly and in agony.' [↗](#) The same point is the primary argument offered by the RSPCA in its campaign against duck shooting. The RSPCA states, 'Some of these ducks are killed outright. Some will be wounded, brought down and killed on retrieval. Many others will be crippled or wounded but not found and will slowly die over the following hours or days, suffering prolonged pain and distress.' [↗](#)

Those who support duck hunting claim that preserving animal welfare is an inconsistent argument against duck hunting, as the people making this argument frequently purchase packaged meat products whose manufacture involves the suffering of animals. Though this is true, there is now a growing opposition to farming practices that cause animals to suffer. A recent report commissioned by the federal Department of Agriculture and Water Resources suggests the majority of Australians care about all aspects of animal welfare. The 2019 report included a survey of 1,521 people: 95 percent of respondents viewed farm animal welfare with concern, and 91 percent want reform to address this. [↗](#)

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