



*Equus caballus*



*Bos taurus*



# 2020 duck hunting season consultation

RSPCA Victoria submission

13.12.2019



*Ovis aries*



*Canis lupus familiaris*



*Felis catus*

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## Introduction

RSPCA Victoria appreciates the opportunity to provide a submission to the Game Management Authority (GMA) on our suggestions for modifications to the 2020 duck season. In this submission we will outline the reasons we believe the 2020 season should be cancelled.

## National RSPCA policy

*RSPCA Australia is opposed to the hunting of any animal for sport as it causes unnecessary injury, pain, suffering, distress or death to the animals involved.*

## Climate

Current climatic conditions as well as the forecasted conditions from January to March will not support sustainable hunting. Dry and drought conditions, higher temperatures and lack of available water all significantly impact waterbird sustainability. The following information from the Bureau of Meteorology (accessed 9 December 2019) should be considered when determining whether to hold a 2020 season:

- Drier than average January to March 2020 likely for eastern Australia.
- Summer daytime temperatures are very likely to be above average across Australia.
- While the remainder of December is likely to be drier than average for most locations, the rainfall outlook for January to March 2020 suggests drier conditions are likely in the east.
- Several months of above average rainfall would be needed to see a recovery from current long-term rainfall deficiencies.
- Victorian water storage is at 49.8% which is down 9.7% from last year.
- Mostly low streamflows are likely for November 2019 to January 2020.
- The past three years have seen dry conditions over much of eastern Australia.
- Rainfall for the 22 months from January 2018 to October 2019, and for the 34 months for January 2017 to October 2019, has been the lowest on record for the Murray-Darling Basin and for New South Wales respectively.
- In Victoria, West Gippsland and East Gippsland each had their driest 34 months on record to October 2019.

- Storage volumes in the northern Murray-Darling Basin continue to decline, reaching a combined volume in mid-November of 6.7% of capacity, which is 1.6% lower than at the lowest point during the Millennium Drought.
- Nationally, Australian rainfall for January to October 2019 was 34% below average, the equal second lowest on record and the lowest since 1902.

Across Eastern Australia the overall abundance, breeding index and breeding species richness of waterbirds are positively related to available habitat. Therefore declines in wetland area are likely to result in declines in waterbird abundance, breeding and breeding species richness.

As acknowledged by the GMA, the Murray-Darling Basin is a critical area for waterfowl production and therefore, the lower storage volumes in the basin are of particular concern for the sustainability of waterbirds.

**RSPCA Victoria recommendation:**

Based on current dry conditions and a poor climate outlook over summer resulting in a lack of available habitat and impacts on breeding, the 2020 duck hunting season should be cancelled.

## Game bird abundance

RSPCA Victoria continues to be concerned by the data provided in the Aerial Survey of Wetland Birds in Eastern Australia year on year which demonstrates the dire conditions that the wetland birds are facing. Specifically, we were concerned to note:

- That the game species abundances are well below long term averages, in some cases by an order of magnitude.
- Waterbirds were concentrated on a small proportion of wetlands and less widely dispersed than in the previous year; 11 wetlands supported more than 5,000 waterbirds representing 50% of the total abundance. None of these occurred in the Murray Darling Basin reflecting the decline in habitat availability.
- The Australian Wood Duck, Chestnut Teal, Grey Teal and Pacific Black Duck, which together made up 97.9% of the game species found in hunters' bags on opening weekend in 2019 all continue to show long term declines in their abundance.
- Wetland area index was the lowest since surveys began.

- All major indices for waterbirds (total abundance, breeding index, number of species breeding and wetland area index) continue to show significant declines over time.

Based on the data in the Aerial Survey of Wetland Birds in Eastern Australia we believe that it is not possible to undertake sustainable hunting in 2020.

**RSPCA Victoria recommendation:**

Due to the long-term declines in game bird abundance the 2020 duck hunting season should be cancelled.

## Animal welfare

RSPCA policy, supported by all RSPCA member societies, supports a ban on duck hunting. However, RSPCA Victoria recognises that this is a legal activity currently supported by both major parties in Victoria. Therefore, if hunting is to continue then we suggest the following initiatives to substantially reduce the negative welfare impact on ducks during open seasons.

RSPCA Victoria would like to reiterate our concerns regarding the welfare of animals in hunting. Duck hunting using a shotgun causes inevitable pain and suffering as not every bird is killed outright. The exact percentage of water birds that are wounded and left to suffer (i.e. are not retrieved) through recreational duck hunting is very difficult to determine with certainty as there has been no recent studies of wounding rates of game birds in Victoria. Historical data has reported wounding rates between 14% to 33%.<sup>1</sup> Assuming a conservative figure of 10% and using the reported total harvest figure of 238,666 from the 2019 season this would mean that nearly 24,000 ducks were wounded and not killed outright. These numbers are unacceptable, and wounding rates need to be determined and addressed.

Determining wounding rates will allow a baseline to be set and will enable testing of different interventions to identify those that would substantially reduce wounding rates and therefore improve duck welfare.

It is important for individual hunters to understand their maximum effective shooting distance. A reduction in range eliminates shots that have a low probability of killing and a relatively high risk of wounding. However, without mandatory practical shooting accuracy testing, many birds will continue to be wounded.

<sup>1</sup> <https://kb.rspca.org.au/knowledge-base/what-are-the-wounding-rates-associated-with-duck-hunting/>



We continue to have concerns that the Shotgunning Education Program (SEP) is voluntary and there is a cost to participate. In addition, we are equally concerned that the Waterfowl Identification Test (WIT) only needs to be taken as a once off. While duck hunting continues to be legal in Victoria, at a minimum the SEP should be made mandatory and regular WITs should be undertaken to reduce the risk of shooters killing incorrect species including those that are vulnerable.

**RSPCA Victoria recommendations:**

1. Undertake research to determine the wounding rate of ducks during the open season
2. Make the Shotgunning Education Program mandatory
3. Introduce an annual practical shooting accuracy test
4. Introduce into regulations the maximum distance at which birds can be shot at
5. Introduce an annual waterfowl identification test

## Duck hunting survey

During August and September 2019, RSPCA Victoria engaged market research firm Colmar Brunton to undertake a survey and analysis of Victorian's attitudes to duck hunting and their visitation to areas where duck hunting occurs. This survey was part of a larger RSPCA Victoria brand-tracking survey that is regularly conducted.

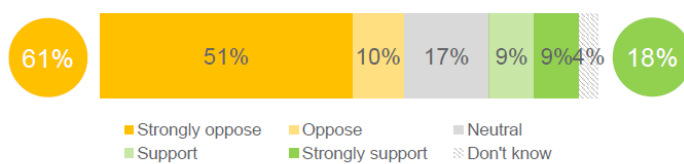
Data was collected from a representative sample of 637 Victorian respondents. The data was weighted to reflect Australian Bureau of Statistics proportions of the Victorian population according to the 2016 Census.

### Results

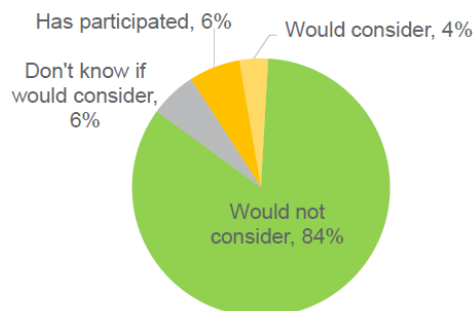
Key results from this survey are outlined below:

- One-half (51%) of Victorians strongly oppose duck hunting and a further 10% oppose it, with less than one-fifth (18%) expressing support.
- The majority (84%) of Victorians would not consider participating in duck hunting. One in twenty (6%) have participated, and 4% have not participated but would consider doing so.

### Support for duck hunting

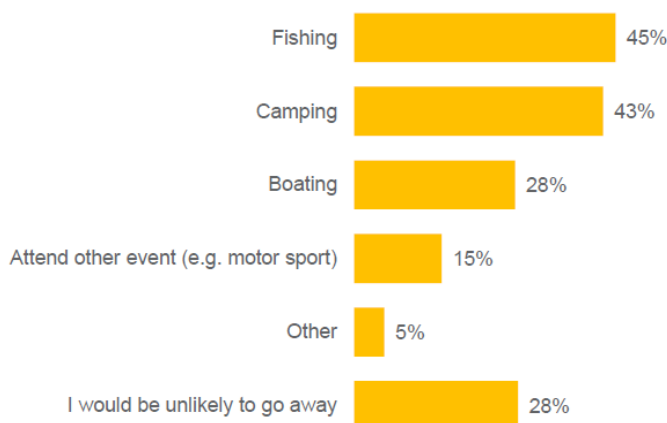


### Attitudes toward participating in duck hunting



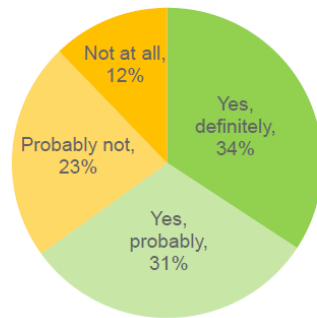
- Among those who have participated in or would consider participating in duck hunting, over two-fifths would be likely to go away for a weekend to fish or camp instead if it were banned (45% and 43% respectively).
- Around one-quarter (28%) said they would be unlikely to go away if they could not participate in duck hunting, leaving almost three-quarters (72%) who would be open to going away regardless.

### Openness to alternative weekend activities if duck hunting were prohibited



- Two-thirds (65%) of Victorians would probably or definitely avoid holiday destinations where duck hunting occurs, while one-third (35%) would not necessarily reject these places.
- Those who would avoid places where duck hunting occurs report spending an average of \$337 for a weekend away in Victoria. One-third typically spend \$100 to \$300, and a similar proportion spend \$301 to \$500 (36% and 35% respectively). This did not differ significantly between demographic groups.

Would avoid holiday destinations where duck hunting occurs



Average spend on a weekend away in Victoria

