



Equus caballus



2017 Duck season advice

RSPCA Victoria submission

15.12.2016



Bos taurus



Ovis aries



Canis lupus familiaris



Felis catus

RSPCA Policy and Position

RSPCA policy on recreational hunting

RSPCA policies are National policies that are agreed upon by the National Board and supported by member societies across the country. The RSPCA's policy on recreational hunting (RSPCA Australia 2016) is:

'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.'

RSPCA position on duck hunting

In relation to duck hunting, the RSPCA's position (RSPCA Australia 2016) is:

'The RSPCA opposes the recreational hunting of ducks because of the inherent and inevitable pain and suffering caused. Every year, during the government-declared 'open season' many thousands of ducks are shot over the wetlands of Australia in the name of sport. Some of these ducks will be killed outright. Some will be wounded, brought down and killed on retrieval. Many others will be crippled or wounded and will die within a few hours or days. Some will suffer prolonged pain before they die.'

However, while this practice continues, RSPCA Victoria has identified a range of key initiatives that could be implemented to try to decrease the level of wounding in this sport and to ensure that only unprotected birds are hit.

2016 season

Prior to the 2016 season the GMA acknowledged

- significant rainfall deficiencies between 2012 and 2015
- the decline of waterbird habitat with the wetland index being at its lowest recorded level
- that the game duck abundance index was lower than the long-term average and at their second lowest levels on record and
- suppression of waterbird breeding.

Despite this evidence, the season length was not reduced and there was only a slight reduction in bag limit on opening day when the clear majority of duck hunters participate. RSPCA Victoria disappointed with this outcome in circumstances when the 2016 conditions were the worst on record.

2017 season

Climate and breeding

The Bureau of Meteorology outlook suggests that the Southern Annular Mode is expected to be in a negative phase in December. This is typically associated with reduced rainfall and higher temperatures. Therefore summer (December to February) rainfall is likely to be below average across parts of eastern Australia and the days and nights are likely to be warmer than average in the east (BoM 2016).

We note that while the climatic conditions improved during 2016 and therefore the breeding index also, waterbird abundance continues to decline and is the lowest on record this year, with game species abundance also well below long-term averages.

The forecast climatic conditions suggest that much of the waterbird habitat available now across Australia will dry up over summer. Birds will inevitably be forced to fly south looking for better habitat and Victoria could end up with a very high percentage of waterfowl from all over Eastern Australia. This makes populations more vulnerable and places more responsibility on Victoria to take a national perspective on protecting Australia's birdlife. RSPCA Victoria believes that this season represents a strong opportunity for Victoria to show environmental leadership by continuing with reduced bag limits to assist in the longer-term recovery of waterbird populations.

RSPCA Victoria recommendations

While we understand that the Government made an election commitment not to ban duck shooting, there is a need to allow bird populations to recover from recent climatic impacts in order to secure their long-term sustainability. Therefore, we recommend the following:

- cancel the 2017 duck shooting season; or
- if the season must go ahead, significantly reduce the bag limits on opening day and for the entire season, and substantially reduce the season length.

Hunting practices

Reducing the number of wounded animals

The exact percentage of water birds wounded and left to suffer (i.e. are not retrieved) through recreational duck hunting is very difficult to determine with certainty.

From the 1950s to the 1980s some surveys of water bird wounding losses in Australia were undertaken, but no recent studies have been conducted. The results from six annual surveys conducted from 1977-1982 reported that NSW duck hunters estimated 9.9% of their total kill were 'shot but not retrieved (i.e. crippled)'. Another study to examine the impact of hunting activity on black ducks, chestnut teals and mountain ducks in Victoria from 1972 to 1977, reported 'cripple losses' ranging from 14% to 33%. Also, an x-ray study of trapped live ducks in Victoria over the period from 1957 to 1973 reported that between 6% and 19% of ducks had embedded shot. While we acknowledge that this data is not current, no recent studies have been conducted on the wounding rates of game birds in Victoria.

Sharley (n.d.) suggested that the wounding rate of birds from duck shooting in South Australia is less than 5%. If we used 5% as our Victorian estimate and extrapolated the wounding rate from the Victorian harvest data in 2015 (286,729 total harvest), this would mean that an additional 14,336 birds were wounded during the 2015 season. RSPCA Victoria believes that this number is unacceptably high.

Shooting range limit

A study by Hampton et al 2015 proposed that the non-lethal wounding of animals is an almost inevitable outcome of a shooting program conducted in field conditions. They concluded that the escape of a wounded animal is the worst of all possible outcomes from an animal welfare perspective because it involves a lengthened duration of suffering. The study found that the probability of an animal being missed or wounded increased significantly with increasing shooting distance.

Supporting the correlation of shooting distance and the number wounded, a study by Noer et al (2007) found that the basic remedial action to reduce wounding rates was to encourage compliance with a 25m maximum range for shooting geese in Denmark. This reduction in range eliminates shots that have a low probability of killing and a relatively high risk of wounding. This study found that since implementing a national action plan to reduce wounding of game, there was a significant decrease in the proportion of geese carrying shot.

Training benefits

Fox et al (2005) found that skilled shooters tended to kill more and miss less but, when using shotguns, their wounding rate scores were not markedly different from unskilled shooters. Also, some participants who had never fired a gun before but who had good hand-eye coordination produced better scores than some experienced shooters. The authors therefore suggested that experience did not always equate to increased skill. They suggested that the benefits of shooter training are not only in improving accuracy, but also in teaching shooters when they shouldn't fire a shot.

The authors suggested that limiting a shot to the greatest opportunity is the best way to reduce wounding.

RSPCA Victoria would be happy to discuss with the GMA how we might be able to support the GMA in reducing wounding rates in duck hunting.

RSPCA Victoria recommendations

- Undertake a study into the wounding rates of game birds and unintended targets in Victoria during the 2017 duck hunting season.
- Introduce an annual practical shooting accuracy test to try to reduce the wounding rate of unintended targets.
- Make the GMA's shotgunning education program mandatory.
- Introduce into regulations a maximum distance at which a bird can be shot at.
- Introduce an annual waterfowl identification test. This test is not effective when it is only needed as a one off.

Compliance

RSPCA Victoria believes GMA's engagement rate with hunters is low, with only 13.5% of hunters engaged with during the 12-week duck season in 2015 (GMA pers. comm.).

RSPCA Victoria recommendations

Employ more authorised officers across the wetlands throughout the season to ensure compliance with relevant legislation.

Further comments

RSPCA Victoria's long standing and strong recommendation is to ban duck shooting based on the cruelty imposed on the birds. However, we acknowledge that due to the current political climate duck shooting is likely continue in 2017.

While we have suggested recommendations throughout our submission that should be implemented when practicable, we strongly recommend the immediate implementation of a compulsory shooting accuracy test as well as a waterfowl identification test for shooters whose license comes up for renewal. We firmly believe that these two measures would significantly reduce the wounding rates and reduce the likelihood of shooting non-target species.

RSPCA Victoria recommendations

Immediately make the following conditions for game licence renewal for duck shooting:

- undertake a shooting accuracy test and
- retake the waterfowl identification test.

References

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