

## Season opens bang on time, and the duck stops here



Shooters show off their kills as duck season opens on Lake Murphy near Kerang.

Photo: *Craig Sillitoe*

By Clay Lucas  
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A BOY and his duck, the sky ablaze with the flash of gunpowder — it makes quite a combination at an opening ceremony, but it's a recipe for trouble out in the swamps.

At dawn yesterday, at wetlands across Victoria, hundreds of good old boys with their shotguns and dreams of a roast dinner went head to head with protesters armed with sirens, megaphones and a well-worn sense of righteousness.

In between were the wild ducks, caught unawares that a new hunting season had come around once more.

As in recent years, the biggest battle took place at Lake Murphy, near Kerang, in the state's north-west — just as dairy farmers were in the middle of milking.

Here 200 shooters and 150 protesters exchanged insults and scrambled through the reeds for fallen birds.

With shooting before dawn banned, the duck defenders were in the water well before daylight, trying to stir the ducks into the air.

By mid-morning, most shooters at the lake said they had bagged the legal limit — seven birds each, the maximum permitted by a Victorian shooting licence.

By then, the opposing forces were back in their camps, each claiming a victory. And each accusing the other of foul play. Laurie Levy, campaign director for the Coalition Against Duck Shooting, says: "Many birds are not killed outright. They have wings smashed, lose eyes, are shot through the bill, they suffer horrific injuries."

The protest, he said, prevented an even greater slaughter.

Yesterday marked 20 years since Mr Levy began his campaign to ban duck hunting in Victoria.

It is a job he described as: "Like the Red Cross. We go into war zones to save innocent victims."

Duck hunting had become so repugnant to the vast majority of Victorians that the battle was all but won, Mr Levy said.

"On Wednesday night the thing that stole the show was the simple duck.

"Native water birds are part of our heritage.

"The duck shooting issue is over. It's now just a matter of Mr Bracks banning it in Victoria."

Not so, said Russell Bate, chairman of shooting association Field and Game Australia.

"There is support for shooting in Victoria like never before," said Mr Bate, who was also at Lake Murphy yesterday.

Duck shooters had long been stereotyped as aggressive troublemakers, but this was complete fiction, he said.

"Look around you. In this group, there is a complete absence of criminal convictions and tattoos, and none of our knuckles have calluses from dragging them along the ground."

Registered shooters in Victoria numbered 23,000 last year, and Field and Game Australia had 14,000 members, he said.

And while Mr Levy is counting on Victoria to line up with Western Australia, NSW and Queensland in banning the hunt, Premier Steve Bracks shows little enthusiasm for it.

"We judge duck shooting on the basis of climatic conditions and what is appropriate in any one year," he said.

"The accreditation system is very strong, and the limits of what you can take are very strong as well.

"But importantly, it's been a long-term pursuit over a long period of time. We think the balance is right."

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