

Duck numbers in startling decline

Extended southern drought to blame, academic says

By **GEOFF STRONG**

THE first blast in Victoria's resurrected duck season has come not from a shooter, rather a Sydney-based academic who has studied Victoria's waterbirds and found them to have suffered the worst number declines in the country.

Last year, Professor Richard Kingsford, of the University of NSW, undertook a national aerial waterbirds survey, with three light aircraft criss-crossing the country mostly at tree-top level.

Yesterday, he said Victoria's duck numbers had declined more than 70 per cent in the past 25 years, but the drop had been an astonishing 60 per cent between 2007 and 2008.

Ironically, the State Government was using his survey to justify holding a duck season because it showed duck increases in northern Australia.

What used to be an annual battle between lead and feathers was closed in Victoria in 2006. Three other states — Western Australia, NSW and Queensland — have banned recreational duck hunting outright, but on Wednesday, the Victorian Government announced a limited season



Gary Howard says duck season is sustainable. PICTURE: GIPPSLAND TIMES

this year, from March 21 to May 8.

Environment Minister Gavin Jennings reasoned that because recent high rainfall in parts of central and northern Australia had locally boosted duck numbers, they were likely to migrate south and could be shot by Victorians.

Professor Kingsford warned against the argument that duck numbers in the north meant shooting in the south could be sustained: "Not all of the game species will migrate. Half of the targeted duck species would be Victorian

residents that have been subject to the pressures of the extended dry season."

Anti-duck shooting campaigner Laurie Levy said he believed the decision had been forced on Mr Jennings by Premier John Brumby, who is seeking to win back support in country Victoria, undermined by unpopular decisions such as the north-south pipeline.

Mr Levy, who heads the Coalition Against Duck Hunting, said his organisation was busy working the phones to contact thousands of activists willing to take part in duck rescue teams over the season.

"A Morgan poll conducted in 2007 found 75 per cent of Victorians opposed duck hunting, but the number rose to 85 per cent when people were told of the impact of climate change and the numbers of birds wounded."

Many of Victoria's lakes are dry and will attract few ducks, the exception being Gippsland.

Gary Howard, who runs a gun store in Sale, said he was already getting inquiries from hunters. "A duck season this year is absolutely sustainable," he said. "We only ever take a certain percentage of birds. What will wipe them out is not hunting but loss of habitat."

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