

Shooting the birds that survived

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AN estimate of up to a million animals dying during the bushfires is hard to fathom in its enormity.

Yet, in a few weeks time - on March 21 - **Victorian Environment Minister Gavin Jennings** sees fit to allow 49 days of state-sanctioned shooting of native waterbirds to go ahead.

For fun.

Yes, that's right, just in case you need to witness further needless death of wildlife at this stage, Mr Jennings is going to deliver it.

Already a deeply unpopular sport in Victoria, Mr Jennings saw fit to go ahead with announcing just before the fires a recreational duck hunting season for this year.

Now, in the wake of devastation across our bush, Mr Jennings sees no correlation with the need to reconsider this already ill-founded move.

When I contacted Mr Jennings' press secretary to find out if the minister was reconsidering this decision post fires, his office merely hid behind an already issued press release that states there will be last-minute checks on which areas are viable for hunting.

But as anti-duck hunting campaigner Laurie Levy points out, this process is no different to previous duck-hunting seasons and rarely results in many areas being closed.

Even the hunters themselves acknowledge the drought and the toll it is taking on native birds.

When you read online forums on local hunting websites, they too are discussing where on earth they will be able to find enough water - and hence adequate birds - in order to hunt.

This decision by Mr Jennings stinks of a desperate attempt to salvage favour in rural areas.

The Government has struggled with the bush and this appears to be a seemingly easy free kick.

But the Government is way off base with this one and it is quite sickening to think we will allow the willing slaughter of native birds to go ahead in the wake of such a crippling drought and at a time when so much of our wildlife has been lost.

Aside from any other arguments, it is morally reprehensible for a state-sanctioned shoot to take place when so much has been wiped out.

RSPCA president Hugh Wirth said even Mr Jennings's own department recommended stopping this shooting season because there were too few birds.

"The Government is chasing rural votes at the expense of cruelty," Mr Wirth said.

He said the drought and then the fire had placed so much pressure on wildlife numbers that it would take five years for some devastated areas to even see hints of new colonies.

Despite living in the middle of suburbia, every day I am lucky to witness the comings and goings of a very devoted pair of native ducks.

It is always the same pair that visit - one has a limp - and they are the most gentle creatures you could imagine.

I marvel at how devoted they are to each other and the idea of shooting them out of the sky - or separating them as a result of that - just for a bit of fun, defies description.

It is a time in our state to savour the bush and all the life it sustains, to appreciate and acknowledge it and look after what has escaped fire, not to pander to a small group of men who for some reason think it's fun and personally empowering to shoot down birds.