

# Protesters gun for 'Wild West' shooters as duck season opens

MARK RUSSELL

STEVE McQUALTER was eight when he shot and killed his first duck. His father was a hunter, and he says he is proud to wear the same tag.

Mr McQualter, 40, of Traralgon, was one of dozens of hunters lured to wetlands near Sale yesterday for the opening of the duck season. They were easily outnumbered by more than 150 protesters, who assembled before dawn to thwart them.

The State Government announced last month that the three-year ban on duck hunting was to be lifted this year, ignoring advice from the Department of Sustainability and Environment to continue the ban. The 49-day season will run until May 8.

Duck hunters will be restricted to a maximum daily bag limit of five game ducks and face a maximum \$2685 fine if they breach conditions.

Anyone who shoots a threatened duck species faces a maximum two years' jail and a \$24,000 fine.

Mr McQualter, who emerged from the wetlands just before 9am after more than two hours in the water without bagging a duck, said he was annoyed when protesters turned up at 6am to try to disrupt the hunt.

"My mates are getting them (ducks) elsewhere so I'm pretty happy about that," he said.

"I see it as a sport, and shooting ducks is a source of food when you're out here camping with your mates," Mr McQualter said. "I got my first one when I was eight years old. It felt pretty good. Dad was a shooter and I just wanted to follow in his footsteps."

Coalition Against Duck Shooting director Laurie Levy said he was appalled that many shooters had wildly opened fire up to 10 minutes before the

season was due to officially open at sunrise (7.10am), not even waiting for a heavy blanket of fog to lift.

"It's a great concern because that's how birds are wounded," Mr Levy said. "It's a bit like the Wild West out there."

Mr Levy said he did not have a particular view of duck shooters but "some are a bit nasty and others are fine".

"I just don't like what they do. It's a brutal activity and it's unnecessary."

"I'm opposed to the recreational shooting of native waterbirds because it's one of those activities that came into force in the 1950s and it's now long outdated."

Mr Levy said he saw the protesters' role as similar to that of Red Cross workers who go in to bring out the wounded.

A Wildlife Victoria mobile veterinary team had been set up in the area to treat wounded birds.

Field and Game Australia chief executive Rod Drewe said he was disappointed protesters had flouted the law by walking into the water and getting close to the hunters when they were barred from entering the wetlands between 7am and 10am.

"These hunters have got firearms, and what if a bloke happened to fall over in the mud ... we don't want to see anyone put at risk," Mr Drewe said. "We acknowledge their right to protest but this is not the place."

Police and Department of Sustainability and Environment officers kept a close watch on hunters and protesters during the morning but there were no ugly confrontations.

A department spokesman said it had been a quiet start to the season, with one hunter found hunting without a game bird licence and another hunting before the season opening. The spokesman did not know how many ducks had been shot.



Protesters waded through the swamp at Dowds Morass, near Sale, as duck hunter Geoff Fisher looks on. *Sunday Age* 22-3-09 PICTURE: KEN IRWIN