

THE AGE

ESTABLISHED IN 1854

It's time to stop the duck slaughter

THERE is good news for Victoria's duck shooting fraternity: the 2011 season, which opens tomorrow, promises to be the best in years. According to the Department of Sustainability and Environment, the above-average rainfall over the past year has "substantially improved environmental conditions", with increased habitat for waterfowl, including game birds. This in turn has led to extensive breeding and wide dispersal of birdlife across eastern Australia's wetlands. As a result, the 2011 season will return to a full 12 weeks, and the normal regulated bag limit — 10 ducks a day, which can include two blue-winged shovellers, for each hunter — "will provide adequate protection for game duck populations", the department says.

All this is bad news, of course, for ducks. According to the Royal Society for the Pre-

vention of Cruelty to Animals, with Victoria's 22,000 registered shooters allowed to shoot 10 birds a day for the next three months, the 2011 season could mark the biggest massacre of native ducks on record. RSPCA president Hugh Wirth doubts that the department's 15 wildlife officers will be enough to enforce the bag limits, and has reiterated the society's call for a ban on what he calls "this cruel and barbaric sport".

The Age is on the side of the RSPCA — and the ducks. The most perplexing thing about duck shooting is why it hasn't already been banned here. The West Australian government stopped it in that state in 1990, New South Wales followed in 1995 and Queensland in 2005. Yet Victoria, a proud leader in progressive public policies on matters such as road safety and smoking, remains a bastion of the duck hunter.

This is still more perplexing given all the evidence indicates that ending duck shooting would be politically popular. A Morgan poll of 637 Victorians in late 2007, for example, found 75 per cent in favour of a ban.

That the "sport" of duck shooting is cruel is not open to question. Hunting flocks of wildfowl with a shotgun means rare and protected species are killed, and it means some birds, which are wounded but not immediately brought down, suffer lingering and painful deaths.

The Age first advocated a ban on duck shooting in 1992. A decade later, after a recommendation by Victoria's animal welfare advisory committee to end the practice, this newspaper wrote: "We did not expect to have to restate the case for a ban in the 21st century." In 2011, surely, the time has come to stop the slaughter.