

Gloomy outlook for Victorian 2021 duck hunting season as numbers take dive

South Australia is going ahead with a duck hunting season, but will Victoria follow suit? We reveal the data authorities will use to decide.

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Eastern Australia's grey teal duck population is yet to recover from drought. Picture John Gitsham

HOPES of a [La Nina](#)-driven lift in duck numbers has taken a dive on the back of a gloomy Eastern Australia's aerial waterbird survey, showing the Murray Darling Basin is still recovering from almost three years of drought.

The University of NSW survey, which is used by the Victorian Government to determine if a duck hunting season should go ahead and under what conditions, showed waterbird breeding was at unsustainable levels, especially among game birds.

“Total breeding index (nests plus broods) was 364 (all species combined), a considerable decrease from the previous year (1987) and well below the long term average,” the report said.

“Breeding species' richness was extremely low, with only three species recorded breeding, the sixth lowest on record. Black swans comprised most of the breeding recorded (296), 81 per cent of the total.”

Even the number of waterbirds surveyed was down to 162,824, less than in 2019 and well below average — the sixth lowest in 38 years of surveys.

The survey team, led by professor Richard Kingsford, found the most abundant waterbird populations were in northern Queensland and northern NSW, including a large part of the northern Murray Darling Basin.

“Waterbirds were more widely dispersed than in the previous year, (and just) five wetlands supported more than 5000 waterbirds representing 35 per cent of the total abundance — three of these occurred in the Murray-Darling Basin,” the team reported.

But as the survey progressed the team found very low numbers of game birds, especially in the southern Murray Darling Basin, Victoria and South Australia.

“All game species abundances were well below long-term averages, in some cases by an order of magnitude (a tenth). Five out of eight species continue to show significant long term declines. Grey teal declined significantly from the previous year.”

The survey’s findings that waterbird recovery still has a long way to go was reinforced by the MDB Authority’s analysis of 2020 released last week, which showed the basin’s northern storages had only recovered to 27 per cent of capacity by December 31.

Murray system inflows for 2020 (excluding the Snowy, Darling, Inter Valley Transfers and managed environmental inflows) were approximately 5700 gegalitres, compared to the long-term annual average of 8800GL.

The South Australian Government has already announced a restricted 2021 duck hunting season, which runs from March 20 to June 27, with a four-duck bag limit.

Victoria’s Game Management Authority is yet to make its recommendation to government based on the University of NSW survey results and those from its own state-based helicopter survey.