

- LEIGH SALES, PRESENTER: The fight over duck hunting on Victoria's wetlands has raged for decades, often leading to heated clashes between protesters and shooters. This year's hunting season opened eleven days ago but on Friday, activists had a small win with the closure of a vast wetland in Victoria's north.

7.30 can tonight show footage of suspect behaviour by some of the shooters. Lauren Day reports. And a warning this story contains graphic images.

LAUREN DAY, REPORTER: A bird's-eye view of a battleground. For decades, duck hunters and activists have fought over this reserve in Victoria's north. But on Friday, the guns fell silent.

LUKE MILROY, COALITION AGAINST DUCK SHOOTING: The GMA decided to close this particular wetlands, the Bail-Bail, Little Bail and the wetlands that's collectively known as 'The Marshes.' I think it's just sort of too little, too late, really. There's not many birds left out here after the weekend.

LAUREN DAY: So where are you taking us, Luke?

LUKE MILROY: Just down to the pits, where we initially found the birds.

LAUREN DAY: Days after the opening of the season, the Coalition Against Duck Shooting says they found two pits containing almost 200 whole game birds, which they say suggests some hunters are shooting above their 10 bird limit. This footage appears to show the moment they dug up their grim find...

COALITION AGAINST DUCK SHOOTING FOOTAGE: Teal, teal...

Hardhead... Teal... Hardhead...

Wood duck...

Teal... Teal... Wood duck...

They're all whole!

Pinkie...

This is a travesty.

LUKE MILROY: About 3m this way, we found the second pit...

LAUREN DAY: And how many birds were in here?

LUKE MILROY: This one had 120.

LAUREN DAY: Wow. You can still smell it.

LUKE MILROY: Yeah, it's pretty disgusting.

LAUREN DAY: There's definitely going to be those accusations when people see this footage that this was a stunt by the activists to try to close down the industry. How will you respond to that?

LUKE MILROY: Ah, I just know the truth, so I just try to ignore it, really.

LAUREN DAY: It is obviously a very vast wetland, though. How did you, you know, narrow in on this particular area? People will say that that's a bit of a coincidence, that you managed to find these pits.

LUKE MILROY: We were checking the shoreline on this side because the wind was blowing this way, so we often find lots of protected and game species that have been shot, and shot dead, washing up on the shore where the wind's blowing.

Also, wounded birds as well - just they try to get to shore to get the weight off their body because they're full of bullets...

LAUREN DAY: The protesters also have footage captured during the opening weekend, showing hunters appearing to wound birds, then failing to put them out of their misery quickly.

In one video, a hunter appears to try to break the neck of a downed bird but, while it's seemingly still flapping, drops it in the water to take further shots at other birds. 7.30 showed the Game Management Authority the footage.

A lot of people, as you said, will find that footage confronting. Is that just the reality of what hunting looks like?

BRIAN HINE, GAME MANAGEMENT AUTHORITY: Ah, I think it is, particularly for people particularly sensitive to animal welfare issues. Particularly for, um, non-meat-eating people, people who may be vegetarian, for example and don't like the issue of meat, either hunted meat or processed meat. The death of animals is never pretty, under any circumstances. I don't particularly see, here anything really critically cruel, other than of course, it's not pleasant to watch animals die for anyone. Yeah.

LAUREN DAY: On Friday, the authority closed wetlands in the state's north after the killing of around 100 threatened birds, as well as uncounted numbers of birds left wounded to die slowly on the water.

BRIAN HINE: Trying to deal with the protester activity at the same time as trying to enforce the compliance and regulation for the hunters. With 120 I think estimated protesters and 2,000 shooters in the early light of the morning in a wet, heavily

vegetated and difficult environment. So it was a difficult operation I think for everybody involved in it.

LAUREN DAY: Sounds like chaos.

BRIAN HINE: Well, the result looks like there was some chaos involved, certainly. Certainly.

The authority's Brian Hine also reviewed the footage of the buried birds.

ACTIVIST VIDEO EXCERPT: They're all whole.

LAUREN DAY: While burying whole ducks is not illegal, killing more than 10 per day is a breach of the regulations.

BRIAN HINE: Look, it's possible there were a number of hunters there who shot their legal entitlement of birds who don't value the bird and don't value the meat, and then buried them. That's a likelihood as well.

It's also a likelihood that they have, potentially, shot their 10 birds on the day, their legal bag limit and these birds have been above their bag limit.

I'm not saying it's not a possibility that that could be the case, we don't know.

LAUREN DAY: The body representing duck shooters, Field and Game Australia, told us it hadn't heard of any shooters exceeding the 10-bird bag limit.

In a statement, it said it condemned the irresponsible and illegal hunting which happened at Koorangie and that it had tarnished the entire hunting community.

The Game Management Authority is reviewing the licensing arrangements for duck hunters and considering implementing more testing for identifying bird species and marksmanship.

ACTIVIST VIDEO EXCERPT: They're nothing but rubbish in a garbage bag.

LAUREN DAY: As activists continue to pull out dead and injured birds from the water, they want more.

LUKE MILROY: Full closure of the duck-shooting season. Just for it not to happen. It's just outdated. It's a barbaric and brutal thing that happens on our wetlands. And, yeah, just devastation to the native waterbirds as well.

LAUREN DAY: How likely do you think it is that duck season will ever be shut down for good?

LUKE MILROY: Fingers crossed but if they keep acting like this, it shouldn't be too long really. They're really shooting themselves in the foot, so to speak.

BRIAN HINE: It's totally unacceptable practice. It's really critical, and the majority of hunters in Victoria would agree that ethically, that is totally unacceptable behaviour. Our responsibility, as the Game Management Authority is to ensure that hunting in Victoria remains sustainable and responsible. And this indicates clearly neither.