

# Hunter warned of bird massacre

The Age,  
May 13, 2013



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## Trigger-happy hunters massacre 800 ducks

More than 800 ducks, many endangered, were killed and abandoned by hunters in an act criticised by Game Victoria as 'appalling'.

The slaughter embarrassed even the most hard-headed of hunters. More than 800 abandoned duck carcasses that shooters did not bother to pick up. At least 150 endangered ducks killed, many among Australia's rarest. And other dead birds - hawk-like whistling kites and black swans - that look nothing like ducks.

"It's terrible. It's absolutely disgraceful," said one of the state's leading duck-hunting advocates, Rod Drew, about the March shootings at the Box Flat private wetland near Boort, in the state's north-west.

The public, including everyone in Game Victoria, is disgusted by what happened and we don't condone it in any way. Any suggestion that we, myself included, failed to do our job, I totally refute that.

But a Fairfax Media investigation can reveal that the shooting spree - the likes of which Victorian authorities have not seen since the early 1990s - could have been prevented. Days before the incident, government officials were tipped off by a concerned hunter with a warning.



Rescuers from the Coalition Against Duck Shooting with a dead freckled duck at Box Flat wetland a week after the March cull.

This hunter, acting as an informant, told a Department of Sustainability and Environment official that Box Flat should be watched on the duck season opening weekend. Only a year before, in an incident never reported, trigger-happy shooters had gone to the remote wetland and shot birds indiscriminately.

The shooters had "shot the shit out of the joint, shot everything that moved", the informant told the department. There was talk, the hunter added, that it would happen again.

But Game Victoria, the government body in charge of the duck season, said that while the tipoff was judged to have "something in it", the authority prioritised potential protester activity on the Saturday morning at nearby Woolshed Swamp. But compliance officers found no protesters there.

By the time they got to Box Flat, the hunters - between 50 and 150 - had been shooting for more than an hour. A landowner, who is furious about the incident but declined to be named, said this was when most of the damage had been done.

The compliance officers and police did no shoreline inspections on the Saturday. It was only when they visited on Sunday morning that they found the first of 147 dead freckled ducks, a rare species protected by Victorian law. The official tally, released to Fairfax Media by Game Victoria, included 561 pink-eared ducks and 136 grey teal ducks that hunters can legally shoot but illegally left behind.

Game Victoria director Simon Toop said the final tally could be higher and did not include the birds hunters took with them.

The government's failure to act on its tipoff raises questions about the oversight of Victoria's duck hunting season following the Coalition's pro-hunting reform.

This season, for the first time, the Department of Primary Industries and Game Victoria were fully in charge of hunter and protester compliance. In past years the more wildlife-friendly Department of Sustainability and Environment was the top agency.

Game Victoria, a new body set up by Agriculture Minister Peter Walsh, now calls the shots on what compliance officers should be doing. It is, say senior government sources, staffed with public servants who themselves hunt and have connections with hunting lobby groups Field and Game Victoria and the Sporting Shooters Association of Australia. These sources say the Box Flat incident showed Game Victoria was more interested in policing protesters than hunters.

Mr Toop said Game Victoria's decision to go first to Woolshed Swamp was because his priority was human life. With scarce resources, Mr Toop said he had to focus on wetlands where protesters might be. "When [protesters] start going in there and confronting hunters it is just a dangerous mix ..." Mr Toop rejected a call from veteran anti-duck hunting campaigner Laurie Levy that he be sacked over the Box Flat incident.

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The incident was uncomfortable for Mr Walsh because it occurred in his backyard: within his electorate and on land of men whom he once played football and went to school with. But the minister said he was "furious" about the shooting. He shut down the wetland for hunting and said the individuals responsible should face the "maximum penalties".

Mr Walsh rejected any suggestion that the Box Flat incident was a result of his government's pro-hunting reforms. He said the people in charge of compliance were the same people from the Department of Sustainability and Environment who had run the season before. Game Victoria's actions after the tipoff were "an operational matter", he said.

The Box Flat investigation, headed by Game Victoria with the help of the Boort police and police detectives, is focusing on at least seven persons of interest. But shooters and landowners spoken to by Fairfax Media are not expecting the investigation to catch the culprits.

They said the shooters, many of whom left the site on the Saturday, were unlikely to do each other in and it would be difficult to prove which hunter shot an endangered bird. One landowner said he would not identify anyone because he did not want "guys with guns" turning up on his property.

Locals are keen to point the finger towards Melbourne. "I don't think they were local, no," said landowner and local councillor Neil Beattie. But investigation information seen by Fairfax Media shows suspects are mostly local and many from Bendigo. A Bendigo man was interviewed at Box Flat for exceeding his bag limit.

Landowner Grant Weaver said he could not recall any problems at Box Flat during last year's season. "There may have been people here last year that may have caused trouble but as far as I know there wasn't anything that untoward done."

In last week's budget, Mr Walsh announced \$8 million for a new Game Management Authority whose board will be at arm's length from the department. Mr Walsh said the new authority would provide better services to hunters and encourage growth in regional hunting businesses.

Field and Game Australia's Rod Drew said protesters should be investigated over the incident. He said it could be more than just a coincidence that the slaughter happened on the year that duck protesters had been sitting for firearm and game licence tests. He said the protesters could have shot the ducks "to bring the shooters into disrepute".

Greens MP Sue Pennicuik called on the government to explain how it allowed the shooting to happen. "The fact that the government was officially warned about this incident makes a mockery of the minister's consistent claims that this activity is highly regulated and the regulations are enforced."