

The Guardian



Daniel Andrews resists calls to end duck hunting after threatened species were killed

Victoria's longest hunting season since 2018 is under way, despite bans on the practice elsewhere

Benita Kolovos

Thu 17 Mar 2022 14.53 AEDT

Victoria's premier Daniel Andrews has resisted calls to end duck hunting, despite the killing of threatened species on the first day of this year's season.

Wildlife Victoria's lead veterinarian, Natasha Bassett, who joined rescue teams at Lake Bael Bael near Kerang on Wednesday, said the first duck she treated was a female blue-winged shoveler.

Hunters are prohibited from shooting both the blue-winged shoveler and hardhead ducks in Victoria this season, given both were recently listed as threatened due to declining populations.

The duck had suffered fractures to its radius and ulna, meaning it would not be able to fully extend its wing to fly and had to be euthanised. A male blue-winged shoveler was also found dead by rescue teams.

Bassett said she also treated other duck species, which were legal to shoot, that were left behind. This is despite hunters being required to make all reasonable efforts to immediately retrieve all downed ducks.

Andrews said he understood recreational shooting "wasn't everyone's cup of tea", but urged those who participate to follow the rules.

“Some of us play golf. Some people go shooting. That’s a choice they are free to make but there are rules and I do see some reports the rules seem to have been broken,” he told reporters on Thursday.

“Anybody who is breaching bag limits or disregarding species, they’ll feel the full force of the law.”

Several Labor MPs, including Lizzie Blandthorn, Josh Bull, Jordan Crugnale, Katie Hall, Dustin Halse, Gary Maas and Steve McGhie, have publicly called for an end to the sport, while senior cabinet ministers have reportedly expressed they want it banned.

Asked if he personally supports duck hunting, Andrews replied: “It’s not something that I do myself, but as the leader of the government, it’s allowed, so the answer to the question is obviously yes.”

He said the Game Management Authority goes through a rigorous process to determine the length of each season and the bag limit for hunters, based on conditions and duck numbers. “It is a fact we’ve had two very wet winters and that’s something that the game management authorities looked at,” Andrews said.

Bassett said it’s her eighth year doing triage work in the wetlands during hunting season. “The shock in the first few years was really very strong. Now I just feel a disappointment that it’s still going on and there doesn’t seem to be a will to do the right thing and end it like other states have done,” she said.

Bassett said only a small fraction of injured birds were treated by the triage team, given most flew away injured.

“You hear the shot and then you see them drop a few feet in the air and there’s just like a little beat in their wings and you know they’ve been hit but they’ve still got the strength to disappear [in] a couple of kilometres,” Bassett said.

“Then they’ll come to ground at some point, they’ll take cover in the reeds and eventually, when they lose strength, they’ll drown or a fox will get them. It’s just a terrible way to go.” Bassett is a licensed shooter and insists she’s not a “soft city vet”.

“My concerns are about the cruelty of it. We don’t just allow people to wander into a flock of sheep in the paddock and shoot, there’s standards, practices and obligations under legislation,” she said.

Duck hunting is banned in New South Wales, Queensland and Western Australia, but the practice continues in Victoria, the Northern Territory, South Australia and Tasmania. Victoria’s season began on Wednesday, and will run until 13 June, with a daily bag limit of four birds.

It is the longest season since 1986, with last year’s going for just 20 days in recognition of lower-than-average bird numbers and breeding.

In its submission to the Game Management Authority, RSPCA Victoria called for a cancellation of the 2022 duck hunting season, based on animal welfare concerns and evidence that waterbird numbers are in decline.

The latest Aerial Survey of Waterbirds in Eastern Australia showed overall waterbird numbers were approaching the low of the millennium drought, when Victoria suspended its duck hunting season from 2007 to 2008.

It found game species abundances were well below long-term averages with six out of eight game species showing significant long-term declines.

The Animal Justice party MP Andy Meddick, who was at Lake Connewarre near Geelong on Wednesday, described day one of the hunting season as “carnage”.

“What I witnessed today on the first day of Victoria’s duck shooting season was appalling. Shooters were wounding birds and not even bothering to retrieve them, which is illegal,” Meddick said.

“Myself and other rescuers did our best to find wounded birds among the reeds, but it is a difficult job.

“There is nothing more distressing than hearing an injured bird and not being able to get to them. The ones we couldn’t find could suffer for days, even weeks, before dying of infection or drowning.”

He said it was hard to believe the Andrews Labor government, which has a strong social-policy agenda, supports duck shooting.

“Day one of Victoria’s duck shooting season was defined by illegal activity and the maiming of threatened species. What will it take for Daniel Andrews to finally act?” Meddick said.

The Greens leader, Samantha Ratnam, said it was clear the government had put the interests of the shooting lobby above the safety of the state’s native ducks.

“It’s time for this government to wake up and recognise duck shooting for what it is: glorified animal cruelty,” she said.

- This article was amended on 17 and 22 March 2022. The location where Natasha Bassett treated the injured bird was Lake Bael Bael, not Lake Connewarre as an earlier version stated. And this year’s duck-hunting season is the longest since 1986, not since 2018.