



Photograph Ken Irwin

They'd been shooting birds by the bagful in Donald, Victoria, since the 1870s. Then Laurie Levy arrived in town.

meets the campaigner who has seen his wetland battlegrounds evaporate ... but not his passion.

LAST MONTH, 10 DAYS BEFORE THE OFFICIAL OPENING OF VICTORIA'S duck-hunting season, Laurie Levy, the ducks' best friend, ventured back to Donald – Duck Country, as the signs on the roads into town declare. Meaning Duck Shooting Country.

Levy kept his head well down. Elsewhere he and his moustache are sometimes mistaken for a retired cricketer (a lady in a Melbourne eatery once wouldn't leave him alone until he'd given her his autograph, as Max Walker), but not in Donald. Levy is as famous as a bunyip here. And about as popular. The kindest word you'll hear uttered about him is "clown".

Donald is a greying silo town in Victoria's Wimmera wheat belt, on the Richardson River. In good years, which used to happen fairly regularly, the Richardson would swell with spring rains and disgorge into Lake Buloke, a vast and shallow wetland just north of Donald. At the end of summer, hundreds of thousands of ducks would congregate here. Come the season's opening weekend in March, up to 15,000 shooters would ring the lake's 80-kilometre shore, little more than a shotgun's range between camps. The men came from near and far, but the greatest hordes hailed from Melbourne's outer suburbs. It was a festival, no less, a free-for-all. Drinkers at Donald's then five pubs would brim over five-deep onto the street. Planes would be hired to buzz the ducks and keep them moving, so everyone could have a ping.

Then along came Laurie Levy. In the mid-'80s, after a decade spent saving whales, Levy set himself the task of saving ducks. His daredevil tactic, famous now, involved the retrieval of wounded ducks and slain protected species from the "battlefield" of the swamp. Levy, a former Channel Nine cameraman, framed his role as the waterbirds' Red Cross. On the Saturday the wounded would be tended to by volunteer vets in vans, and on the Monday



the dead would be laid outside the premier's office. It was TV-perfect.

In 1989, Levy took his sideshow of protesters and sympathetic media to Lake Buloke. Too late the gathered shooters realised that they were the sitting ducks. The cameras feasted on the sheer scale of the slaughter – black swans and other protected species rained down alongside the game birds. Levy returned to Lake Buloke five times over the next eight years, to devastating effect. Shooters were savaged on talkback. In 1993, *The Age* editorialised that duck shooting was “an obscenity”. By 1997, the number of hunters around Lake Buloke had dwindled to about 800. That was also the last year it held water. Donald's party was over, gatecrashed by Levy and drought. But in the thriving clay-target clubs of the Wimmera hope burns eternal: a wet year will come, the ducks will return and Laurie Levy, well, he's getting a bit old for this, surely.

LEVY'S COALITION AGAINST DUCK SHOOTING SUCCESSFULLY CAMPAIGNED for recreational duck hunting to be banned in Western Australia (1990), NSW (1995) and Queensland (2005). Yet it's curious that a final victory should so far have eluded Levy in his home state. Even more curious was Premier John Brumby's announcement earlier this year that there would be a season in 2009 (which ends on May 8). The 2007 and 2008 seasons were called off because of the drought, yet this season Victoria is even drier, and duck numbers have declined by 60 per cent in the past two years. The Department of Sustainability and the Environment had recommended another moratorium, but several sources claim their Minister, Gavin Jennings, rejected the advice under orders from the Premier's Department.

The Government reasoned it acted on the advice of its Hunting Advisory Committee, which is stacked with hunting representatives. In the committee's

opinion – quite wrong, as it turned out – ducks would be winging their way south in time for the Victorian season after good rains had created excellent breeding conditions in NSW and Queensland. Another reason offered was that wood ducks were reaching pest proportions. Authorities emphasised that under a new five-duck bag limit, three of the five had to be wood ducks. But “woodies” favour farm dams over wetlands, and farmers typically take out permits to cull them rather than entrusting such a task to hobby hunters.

The foggy justifications have left a whiff of political expediency. Ahead of the last election, the Country Alliance, a splinter party claiming to represent recreational shooters, did an unlikely preference deal with the Labor Party in the upper house seat of Northern Victoria. The party, whose chairman also chairs Field and Game Australia, resented the cancellation of the 2008 season and fulminated that a hat trick of moratoria would be unforgivable. Shooting organisations have a habit of overstating their political clout (62 per cent of country Victorians want duck shooting banned, according to a 2008 Morgan poll), but ever since Jeff Kennett was rolled by the bush for being seen to become the “Premier for Melbourne”, Victorian politicians have tended to tiptoe around issues that might harden perceptions of metropolitan bias.

And so, as Victoria rode out its most disastrous dry spell yet ahead of this year's March 21 opening date, shooters scrambled to renew their game licences and Laurie Levy, at 67, limbered up to do battle once more. But where? On a whim, I rang Levy to arrange a tour of the traditional hunting wetlands in north-west Victoria. In the years Levy wasn't patrolling Lake Buloke, he would “work”, as he likes to call it, the Ramsar-listed (internationally significant) wetlands around Kerang. “You'd drive up from Melbourne on the Friday and it was like you were caught up in an

Fowl play: (left) husband and wife Geoff and Gail Fisher ready for action at Dowd Morass, in Victoria's Gippsland, on the opening weekend of this year's duck-shooting season.



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army convoy, there were that many shooters heading up there,” he said.

Levy and I visited Lake Cullen, Lake Murphy, the Bael Bael Marshes, Lake Macdonald, Lake Leaghur, Hird Swamp and Lake Boort. Every one of these past battlegrounds lay dry. We did not see one duck. There were still some around, of course, dotted about the country on weirs, private dams and reservoirs. Local hunters would doubtless find them. But such bodies of water are unsuitable for Levy’s purposes – his made-for-TV campaign relies on large shallow wetlands where protesters might either wade or kayak their way among shooters. By the time we checked in to Donald, where Lake Buloke lay barren for the 12th year in a row, it was starting to look as if Levy was a rebel without a wetland.

WHEN TRAVELLING WITH LEVY IT’S BEST NOT TO LET HIM DRIVE. HE drives like he talks, gently and ponderously. He decelerates in anticipation of a bird, any bird, crossing the road. Most of these birds are hypothetical. If a bird does fly across, he’ll slow down some more, just in case a mate follows it. If a bird is already a sticky mess of feathers, he’ll likely as not reverse, get out and stoop over the thing in a heavy silence. He says he inspects roadkill to make sure it can’t be rescued, but the impression is of a man paying his respects.

In the late ’80s, Levy ran his campaign under the banner of Animal Liberation. It was an association that cost him crucial support in the country. Contrary to popular perception, Levy is not an animal liberationist, or even anti-shooting per se – he’s just a vegetarian who supports the culling of introduced animals.

His regard for native animals, however, is childlike. He admits his 24-year obsession with ducks has kept him single, childless and, often as not, peniless. “Being single-minded isn’t good for long-term relationships,” he tells me. “Friends say I need more balance in my life, but my work is my religion. I get immense satisfaction when I switch on the TV and see whales being rescued, and I see the happiness on the rescuers’ faces. With the ducks it’s the collusion between shooters and government that keeps me going. What chance have the birds got? They need someone there for them.”

Although Levy’s Coalition Against Duck Shooting receives financial support from other groups, it remains very much a one-man show, and some of his supporters have begun to question whether Victorians might be suffering from some form of Levy fatigue. Instead of being recognised as the tactician of one of the country’s most effective environmental campaigns, Levy has become almost a caricature, a figure of fun whose whiskers appear in the annual news cycle as regularly and predictably as Santa’s.



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Born an only child to secular English Jews, Levy has a long history of siding with the underdog. "I was a very small kid, always getting belted for sticking up for other kids. I disliked anything or anyone being picked on." Later, as a cameraman with Channel Nine, he found himself covering injustice uncomfortably often. Neil Bethune, a colleague from those days, says Levy was particularly affected by images of animal helplessness. Bethune and Levy left Nine to set up the Whale Rescue Centre, which pioneered the type of response to whale strandings that is standard government policy now. Bethune says Levy was always an introvert. "He's not a natural media performer. He has to steel himself to present a certain side to the media for the sake of those who can't speak. It always took a lot out of him."

In 1985, Levy visited a game reserve near Geelong for the first time and found a shot pelican, several crippled black swans and a number of protected duck species. His initial campaign was to delay the dawn opening

by an hour, from darkness to daylight, so hunters might at least see what they were shooting. It seemed a reasonable enough proposition, yet was met with a howl of protest. "Back then you could buy ammunition at Kmart," says Levy. "Shooters were treating wetlands like a free-for-all, and rangers were letting them. We wanted the public to know. We wanted the hunters' wives and kids to question what their [husbands and] fathers were doing."

Levy's campaign achieved steady results. In 1986, the Department of Environment banned its wildlife officers from shooting while on duty. In 1990, it introduced a compulsory waterbird identification test for hunters, which immediately reduced their number by a third. And in 2001, lead shot was finally phased out in response to Levy's long-running (and long-proved) claims that waterbirds were being poisoned by ingested shotgun pellets.

When Levy started his campaign 24 years ago, there were 100,000 duck hunters statewide. Today there are 19,000. Might Levy not have achieved enough? "No. I won't rest until it is banned. And it will be. Working for [Kerry] Packer at Channel Nine taught me a lot about winning."

Russell Bate, the chairman of Field and Game Australia, insists that hunting has its place. He quotes Animal Liberation's view that hunting is less cruel than farming. He points out that declining duck numbers are the result of habitat loss, not hunting, and that hunters support wetland rehabilitation. Yet all this misses Levy's central point: that in this day and age, it is no longer sporting for grown men to kill ducks. After all, even those who pluck and eat what they shoot, shoot primarily for fun.

Rod Drew, Field and Game Australia's chief executive officer, says the sport is more sporting than it was. "The use of semi-automatics [prior to John Howard's new gun laws in 1996] created a blast-away mentality," he says. "With single shots, shooters have to be more selective. In the past, blokes would take away 500 shells for a bag limit of 20. You don't see that any more. The blokes we have left are responsible hunters. If Laurie Levy has done one thing, he has cleaned up the rednecks. I'm happy to give him that."



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GARY HOWARD RUNS A GUN SHOP IN SALE, GIPPSLAND, IN EASTERN Victoria. As a spokesman and life member of Sale Field and Game, one of the national association's strongest chapters, Howard is precisely the sort of responsible hunter Drew is talking about. Field and Game owns a property that encompasses much of Heart Morass, a degraded wetland abutting the lower Latrobe River. The shooters have been rehabilitating the swamp in a novel partnership with a local environment group and the West Gippsland Catchment Management Authority.

Unlike the rest of the state, Gippsland managed to remain damp in places over summer. So that I might gain a glimpse of the other side of the Levy story, of the culture and camaraderie of duck hunting, Howard agrees to take me out hunting with his mates on opening weekend.

Still, even in Gippsland, water levels and duck numbers are down, way down. In fact, Howard forgets to mention over the phone that Heart Morass is almost dry, too. One week ahead of opening, I hear from Levy, who is a member of Field and Game under an assumed name. He'd obtained a key to the association's property to assess duck numbers on Heart Morass, only to stumble across a channel diverting water from the Latrobe River into the swamp. It transpired that Southern Rural Water, which owns the water, knew nothing of the diversion. Any diversion requires a permit and the captured water must be bought at market prices.

Levy went to the local media. Gary Howard owned up to removing the channel's timber locks for five days, claiming he'd done so for environmental

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Feathers will fly: (above, from left) Laurie Levy, at left, and a shooter exchange words at Lake Murphy in 1991; protesters arrive last month at Dowd Morass just before dawn.



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reasons. Yet Field and Game's partners in the lake's rehabilitation had not been consulted. And the timing was highly suspect. For some months Field and Game members from around the state had been promised a duck shoot on Heart Morass. Through the association's website, shooters were able to pay \$50 for a key to access the property, yet a fortnight out from the start of the season there was only a stagnant puddle and nary a duck on it.

When I ring Howard to cancel our hunting foray, he says he understands. "My credibility is shot," he concedes. Meanwhile, the diversion has filled the swamp sufficiently to attract some 1000 ducks by opening weekend, most of which are duly shot and bagged.

BACK IN DONALD, I SHOW LEVY THE FRONT PAGE OF *THE BULOKE Times*, the paper that has given him more curry than any other over the years. The story is a light-hearted piece about a clay-target shooter who, in attempting to knock off corellas plaguing the local bowling green, had punctured the club's water pipe. "These people need to change their mindset," Levy says. "Why can't they learn to be fond of corellas? They could be a tourist attraction."

Now, Donald is a shooting town, but it is not an angry town. Tell a local they should love their grain-guzzling corellas and they'll laugh till their teeth fall out. They're also more than happy to tell you what you want to know. Such as: what is the record number of corellas felled with one shotgun blast? *Eighteen*. What is the record number of ducks with one shot? *Nine*. (*Ducks fly further apart than corellas.*) What duck species tastes the sweetest? *Freckled duck*. (*It's an endangered species.*)

What is the record number of ducks shot on Lake Buloke on opening day? It's 234, according to the affable 82-year-old editor of *The Buloke Times*, Robin Letts. The record is held by a past state president of Field and Game, who still lives in town. When I ring him to confirm, he tells me it was actually 134 and that his wife and mother plucked the lot. He requests his name not be used. "The bag limit was 20 back then, I think."

I drop in at the local historical society to see Lil Kirk, one of Donald's living treasures. She has no wish to meet Levy – "he's an extremist" – but neither is she a fan of duck shooting. "Few women in town are," she says. "It seems a needless sport." She finds me a local history text she has written, which includes a chapter on duck hunting. Grog-fuelled shooting sprees on Lake Buloke date back to the 1870s. Kirk notes that many of the species that were



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considered fair game then – brolgas, bustards, bitterns, magpie geese, Cape Barren geese, mallee hens – were hunted to local extinction.

Back at the motel I show the chapter to Levy. "Nothing's changed," he says grimly. "Duck shooters like to say they're just 'harvesting surplus ducks', as if they're responsible land managers. Truth is, if there were a single duck left in the state these blokes would still be arguing for a bag limit of 10."

Although Levy keeps to himself in Donald, he cannot avoid our motel owner, Trevor Campbell. In the years of Levy's escapades on Lake Buloke, Campbell ran a farm on the lake's north-eastern corner. On opening weekend his four-kilometre lake front would be dotted with campfires, and Campbell, a CFA volunteer, used to keep the fire truck handy, just in case. The farm is now run by Campbell's son, Adam, and Campbell offers to drive us from there across the lake bed the next day. Overnight, the first rain in three months falls. In the morning the lake tracks have turned soft. We are stuck in the farmhouse kitchen for two hours until they dry out. Adam has rustled up two shooting mates to pass the time. The rain has put everyone in a good mood, but the younger men waste no time in taking Levy to task.

Two things quickly become clear. One, Levy's ecological knowledge is not a patch on that of the farmers. And two, the men are wasting their breath. Levy doesn't really engage on an intellectual level. His is a duck's eye view – at times his naivety is so striking, you half expect him to quack.

Trevor Campbell has been listening quietly. "Don't tell my son, but Laurie's view will prevail," he tells me. "I'll always defend a farmer's right to shoot a duck to eat. But this is a debate we cannot win, because city people have become estranged from the land. If the media covered abattoirs the way they cover duck shoots, you'd end up banning beef."

Around noon Campbell drives us across the enormous lake bed in his ute. Failed cereal crops cover much of the northern half. To the south the river red gums are struggling. The lake has been dry for long periods before, but never this long. Levy is transfixed. "I've only known this as a beautiful wetland," he says. "And as a war zone."

Campbell smiles genially. "Ah yes, Laurie, those were the days." **GW**

At the time of writing, Gary Howard was still waiting to hear whether any action would be taken over the diversion of water into Heart Morass. Meanwhile, Levy and his battalion of 170 activists spent opening weekend at a Gippsland game reserve where they far outnumbered shooters, and possibly even ducks.