

From Armchair to Out There

By Rachael Morris

'You must be the change you wish to see in the world.'

Mahatma Ghandi

This is my favourite mantra and one I endeavour to live by. Yet, there are countless causes in the world, and millions of activists supporting them in a myriad of ways. It's fair to say you can't be everything to everyone, you just have to do your best. So that makes me question, what exactly is my best? Am I doing enough? And what difference does it make? In due course my questions landed me at an information night hosted by the Coalition Against Duck Shooting (CADS), who I supported via the marvels of Facebook campaigning. A 'sign' here and a 'like' there, and before I knew it I was enlisted as a rescuer for the opening weekend of Victoria's 2011 Duck Shooting Season.

We are instructed by CADS director, Laurie Levy, on what to bring for the weekends action, how to behave in different situations and what to be aware of regarding safety in the field. Basically, we are gunning for the moral high ground and aiming for minimum collateral damage. Damage to ducks that is. No one in the rescue team has ever been shot in the movement's twenty-five year history. He is grave in his warning of the dangers of guns, yet assures us the conflict is quite tame these days. My friend Mel, who volunteered as a rescuer last year tells me, it had been tough but not as bad as she expected. I think I'm ready for direct action. At this point I'm feeling pretty good about my integrity and only mildly concerned about my courage.

As the weekend draws closer, the battle lines are drawn and the two sides couldn't be more polarised. Australian shooter's magazine *Feather & Fur* have created a 'Celebrate the Hunt Festival' offering over \$25,000 in prizes to encourage hunters to make their 'pilgrimage' to the iconic wetlands in Donald. On the other hand, the RSPCA have launched a campaign called 'Victoria's Day of Shame' and are calling for public pressure against what they call the 'Armageddon of our native duck population'. Victoria is one of the few remaining Australian states that still allow duck shooting.

On the day I wake before my alarm to the sound of quiet murmurs and tent zippers. It is 4.15am. I sit up in my sleeping bag on a partially deflated air mattress and flick on my torch. Mel, on the other side of the tent, is doing the same. We wave a silent good morning. By 4.30am we are dressed in our combat gear of leggings, dive booties and high-vis vests. We sit in the car with the engine running trying to warm up. It is 6 degrees.

Teams are forming and rolling out of the Donald caravan park one by one. We don't talk much but when we do we face each other square on so Mel can read my lips by the lights of the dashboard.

She asks, 'How do you feel?'

I look at her and say, 'I'm okay. I'm ready.'

But I'm not.

Finally our team gets moving. We turn out of the campground and take our position at the end of the long line of vehicles idling in the dark on the side of the road. We'll be heading out in about five or so minutes. We are just waiting for Channel 10.

It's time. Our convoy of a hundred or so vehicles silently snakes its way through the sleeping town of Donald in north-western Victoria and towards the banks of Lake Buloke. Widespread flooding and excessive rainfall earlier in the year has brought water up to levels that have not been seen in well over a decade. This has proven a boon for native waterfowl and a subsequent bounty for game shooting.

As several hundred volunteers mill about on the shores of the lake all I can think about is how much I don't want to do this. My courage is shaking as much as my body in the frosty morning. But it is all too late to back down now, I can't disappoint these people and I can't turn my back on the ducks. Moreover, I refuse to let myself down by renegeing on my own mantra.

The onshore camps are clearly delineated, even in the darkness. The CADS rescue team shuffles about in the freezing predawn air, the chatter a combination of nerves, excitement and outrage. I stand silently and watch the hunters emerge in dribs and drabs from a fenced in campsite, curiously surveying the opposition. They have a banner stating 'Preserving Cultural Traditions'. In between us are

Department of Environment and Sustainability (DSE) Officers and armed police. We have been warned several times that it is illegal for anyone to enter the water without the required licensing until 10am, and anyone doing so will be fined. None of us have the required firearms license. None of us have a game license specially endorsed for duck.

Team leaders check our names off a list and inform us it is time to move. I relay our group's scant instructions to Mel. Teams fan out around the shore of the lake. We move quickly and with purpose. We need to enter the water without being detained by the DSE. The officers move along the shore, trailing us, but on stopping one team, allow the rest to break free.

Our team leader shouts, 'Right! Go! Go! Let's get in there'.

In previous seasons rescuers have waded in wetlands in about thigh high water. Today, we can only get about a hundred metres off shore before we are up to our necks. I am barely 5 foot tall and frequently lose footing in the water. At times I swim fully clothed, laden with my small backpack of supplies. The water is icy and the previously dry terrain, now invisible under water, is unpredictable. The sky is beginning to lighten and all is quiet while we wait for the 7.20am official opening of the season. I feel like I am holding my breath. Mel checks in with me again, 'You doing okay?'

'Yeah, I'm fine. It's absolutely beautiful out here', I say through a jaw tight with cold. And it's the truth in this suspended moment.

There are large partially submerged red gum trees all around our small team of eight rescuers. Heavy branches are held out like arms aloft dripping with the soft green of eucalyptus. The water is perfectly still. We have entered the lake on the south-western side of the 5,500 hectare wildlife reserve and facing out across the water a soft glow signals the rising of a huge red sun. It slowly creeps out of the horizon of water, blazing red in the misty dawn sky. We are unanimously silenced by the spectacularly sublime moment. I wish it could stay like this. As the cold enters my bones and the sun continues its slow journey up the sky, the lake awakes with the tittering of birdlife.

It is not long until the first crack of a shotgun splits the sky open with a thunderous roar.

I flinch and my eyes well with tears.

I swallow hard and recover quickly.

Game face.

Someone shouts, 'That way! Hunters are in those trees. Let's go!'

Our team wades towards the gunfire as ducks fall out of flight and into the water up ahead. I gather a floating body and cradle it gently, her neck hangs loosely and I know she's beyond saving. We take her with us.

We try to get as close to any hunters we can find to prevent them from using their guns in line with shooting regulations. Failing that, we have whistles that pierce the air like sirens and scare off approaching ducks. We attempt to rescue any injured birds we can get our hands on by raising our kayak team on a walkie-talkie. They transport them to mobile vet clinics that do what they can. Mostly, they have to euthanise them. Dead birds are kept to line the steps of parliament with on Monday. The hunters are careful to retrieve their victims when we are nearby and DSE are careful to confiscate any we may have in our possession. So the currency of the day is duck.

The gunfire remains constant and blasts out from all directions. The air gradually becomes hazy with smoke instead of dawn. We track hunters as best we can, but this year many are in boats and move into deeper parts of the lake as they see us approach. We trudge on in the cold, numb to the pain now. The hunters are hard to see in their camouflage gear and leaf decorations so we track them by the boom of their guns. I'm not afraid anymore. I am fucking pissed off that I am standing in a freezing swamp, surrounded by dead ducks and army rejects.

Our team is now six. We have lost two rescuers to the onset of hypothermia. It takes them over an hour to get out of the water owing to a contingent of DSE tracking them along the banks, as if stalking their own prey. The rest of us find three hunters on foot in waders and fair game to us. We split into pairs each covering one hunter. Mel and I are careful to stay together. This was our pact.

We stand about ten metres in front of the hunter, which I have been advised is the required legal distance. Although on this *one* weekend of the twelve-week season, my being here is illegal until 10am. This is for safety reasons, but for the remainder of the season anyone can enter the water at anytime. I wonder how this

can be any safer on any other weekend? The hunters call opening weekend a one off 'token protest', although there are CADS rescuers in smaller numbers in the ever-colder water every weekend of the season, every year.

The hunter behind us is an old guy, at least sixty. He has a craggy face with sunken eyes that stare levelly at us for the hour or more we cover him. Thankfully he is the strong, silent type and we are not verbally abused as I have been warned is common. I eyeball him back once or twice, but have to be careful as the DSE are behind him on the bank with a telephoto lens. Mel and I stand in chest high water and share a soggy juice out of my pack, keeping our backs to the shore. I am keen for 10am to roll around so I can quit this skirmish and get the hell out of here.

The boom and crack of gunfire has little by little ceased from being constant and now comes in sporadic bursts as the morning wears on. The recently serene wetland still looks sadly the same amidst all the conflict. Not far from where we stand a tiny duckling no bigger than the palm of my own small hand motors across the vast expanse of Lake Buloke. Alone. Mel and my eyes catch in a moment of exquisite beauty and pain.

That is the reason I am here. It's that little hatchling with his death sentence, and no reprieve. My game face is cracking and I know I will bleed on the inside, beyond this morning.

Two boats approach and circle us. We stare hard and accusingly at what we assume are hunters in their cammo gear and ammo belts. Our mistake. It is DSE in disguise. They herd us out of the water and into the waiting infringement notices on the bank. It is 9.45am. We almost made it.

While Mel and I are getting fined and shivering hard, we hear shouts that a rescuer has been shot in the face. *What the fuck?* The team member who helped her out of the water tells us she copped a spray of pellets they believed came from a revved up kid they had inadvertently pissed off earlier by scaring off ducks while rescuing the maimed. In an effort to make a kill, the fourteen-year-old apparently shot at a low flying duck, which escaped unharmed. She said the boy and his guardian turned their backs on the bleeding woman to save their own. Their bloody arrival on shore sent all camps into a quiet state of shock, mirroring her own. We all knew when the drama passed that we would be in the middle of a

media pandemonium. And not one of us knew how it would change the game. But we all knew it would.

Much later, at the CADS debrief, I chatted to the veteran rescuer, Laurie Levy. He has a soft voice, and a sad face, that has become as worn as his customary CADS cap. In his gentle and interested manner he says, 'This was the worst opening season we have ever seen. It was hell out there.'

'It was hard. I'm glad I was part of it, but ... it just doesn't feel like I made any difference...'

He says, 'Twenty years ago there were about 15,000 hunters on this lake. This year there were about 500. It's a dying sport and even the prize money isn't bringing them out here. If we weren't out there rescuing ducks, no-one would be.'

He asks if I'll go out again.

I want to do it even less than I did on opening day.

But I am now a part of the change I want to see.

And the problem is, that what I have seen, I cannot un-see.