

Victorian National Parks Association and Environment Victoria submission to the Wildlife (Game) Regulations 2024

July 2024

Thank you for the opportunity to provide a submission to the Wildlife (Game) Regulations 2024 update.

The Victorian National Parks Association (VNPA) is an independent member-based organisation, working to improve protection of Victoria's biodiversity and natural areas, across land and sea. The VNPA has been actively working to protect Victoria's biodiversity for 70 years.

Environment Victoria is not-for-profit environmental advocacy organisation in Victoria. With 40 grassroots member groups and over 200,000 individual supporters, we've been representing Victorian communities on environmental matters for over 50 years. Our healthy rivers campaign has been advocating for healthy wetlands and wildlife in the Murray-Darling since 2005.

The VNPA and EV believe that the shooting of native birds is inherently cruel and threatens the health of wetland ecosystems and wildlife species.

We believe the Victoria's recreational native bird hunting arrangements should come to an end as recommended in the *Victoria's recreational native bird hunting arrangements (August 2023) under Recommendation 1: That the Victorian Government ends the annual recreational native bird hunting season opening on all public and private land from 2024.*

There must be no extensions given to the duck shooting season

Plains wanderer in need of safety

Plains Wanderer (*Pedionomus torquatus*) is listed as Critically Endangered under State and Commonwealth laws (EPBC Act and FFG Act) and share similar habitats and look alike to native quails subject to recreational shooting.

Plains Wanderer are very difficult to distinguish from and are likely to be mistaken for quail when flushed by with quail shooters, this leaves the Plains Wanderer at risk of direct mortality from shooting.

Quail shooting is listed as a Key Threat under the Commonwealths National Recovery Plan for the Plains Wanderer¹.

Due to the declining number of this iconic grassland species, the hunting of native quails in the Plains Wanderers distribution must cease across both public and private land to ensure the species isn't harmed by native quail shooting.

At a bare minimum a 12 Hectare² buffer zone around known Plain Wanderer records as found on the Victorian Biodiversity Atlas, INaturalist and Atlas of Living Australia. This is based on the average home range of the Plains Wanderer.

¹ National Recovery Plan for the Plains-wanderer (*Pedionomus torquatus*), Commonwealth of Australia 2016'.

² National Recovery Plan for the Plains-wanderer (*Pedionomus torquatus*), Commonwealth of Australia 2016'.

Hardhead should remain in no shooting list

Although Hardhead (*Aythya australis*) was removed from the Flora and Fauna Guarantee Act 1988 Threatened List in June 2024 that animal was still found to be Near Threatened by the Scientific Advisory Committee (SAC), with Near Threatened not recognised in the FFG Act.

As the species was found to be stable with no increase or decrease in the last three generations there is a need to act in a precautionary principal before an open season is called on the species.

There is a need to use the Precautionary Principal before allowing an open season on the species, the Rio Declaration on Environment and Development (1992) Principal 15 defines a Precautionary Approach as:

“where there are threats of serious or irreversible damage, lack of full scientific certainty shall not be used as a reason for postponing cost-effective measures to prevent environmental degradation”³.

The species still remains vulnerable to climate change, drought and destruction of wetland ecosystems.

Hardhead (*Aythya australis*) should remain on the no-kill list of protected wildlife.

Protect Migratory Wildlife

Latham’s Snipe (*Gallinago hardwickii*) was banned from hunting in Australia as a result of the Japan - Australia Migratory Bird Agreement 1981 yet the species remains on the Game list with a year-round closed season.

This sets a dangerous precedent for hunters to down play the importance of laws that protect the species, **the species must immediately be removed from the game list all together.**

Hunting must be excluded from all areas with species records listed under Commonwealth and International law and agreements, those agreements include the following;

- China-Australia Migratory Bird Agreement
- Republic of Korea-Australia Migratory Bird Agreement
- Japan-Australia Migratory Bird Agreement
- Convention on the Conservation of Migratory Species of Wild Animals (Bonn Convention)
- Areas listed under the Ramsar Convention on Wetlands

³ THE RIO DECLARATION ON ENVIRONMENT AND DEVELOPMENT (1992)

Exclusion of wildlife hunting from Conservation Lands

Victoria's is the most cleared State in Australia, with habitat largely cleared for farming and development. This leaves remaining areas of natural habitat as critical refuges for our unique plants, animals and ecological communities.

This makes remaining areas of natural habitat on public land vital for the plants and animals that have called Victoria home for millennia.

It seems perplexing then that native bird shooting is allowed across public lands, that have conservation of nature and wildlife as their objectives, and allow for low impact recreation such as walking, camping and fishing.

Wildlife (State Game Reserve) Regulations apply to many Natural Features Reserves that are also State Wildlife Reserves, classified as State Game Reserves where shooting is permitted.

The conflict between land tenure objectives that have purposes for the conservation and protection of native wildlife and passive recreation being open to duck shooting is contradictory. The conflict between shooting wildlife and conservation of natural areas and wildlife must be resolved by ceasing the killing of native birds within these areas from shooting, as this is not an appropriate activity for these public lands.

Shooting of wildlife is also allowed in areas listed under the National Parks Act 1975 and Conservation and Lands Act in contrast to the Objectives of those Act. These parks include;

- Gippsland Lakes Coastal Park
- Cape Conran Coastal Park
- Lake Albacutya Park
- Nooramunga Marine and Coastal Park

Areas listed under the National Parks Act and Conservation and Lands Act that are Parks must be removed permanently from the areas subject to shooting of native wildlife.

Removing Tower Hill from a Kill Zone

Tower Hill Wildlife Reserve is a popular tourism spot for local and international visitors to connect with wildlife in a natural bushland setting.

Community groups have long called for the area to be removed from the areas subject to duck shooting⁴ and returned to the status of a National Park⁵

The VNPA supports the calls by the Friends of Tower Hill and locals to protect the site for wildlife and tourism and to end the hunting of wildlife at Tower Hill, and recognises the importance of the site to local tourism operators

Hunting at Tower Hill should be permanently removed from areas subject to hunting for the safety of visitors and wildlife.

Immediate ban on lead needed

It is proposed that lead ammunition be phased out for deer hunting by 2028 and September 2024 for fowl.

Lead is a well-known to impact human health as a toxic heavy metal, while also polluting soil, water, and air.

As highlighted by Hampton et al. 2023, "it is clear that lead-based bullets used for shooting deer in Australia pose risks to wildlife scavengers, and to human consumers when used in hunting"⁶

Lead bullets must be immediately banned from sale and use

Protection of Feral Deer removed

Feral deer have invaded over 40% of Victoria from our snow covered alpine peaks to farmers paddocks and suburban backyards on the city fringes.

Community feedback has overwhelmingly supported listing all deer species as a pest in Victoria.

In June 2020 a Federal Senate inquiry into the *Impact of feral deer, pigs and goats in Australia* recommended that all Australian states and territories change their laws to ensure that deer are "treated as an environmental pest". In addition, the senate inquiry found that the states should "maximise the ability of park managers to control feral deer in World heritage areas and National Parks", and "maximise the ability of landholders to manage deer on their land".

All deer species found in Victoria should be removed as a game species and listed as a Pest

⁴ Campaign to stop duck hunting at Tower Hill, Rachael Houlihan, The Standard 2016

⁵ Friends of Tower Hill, Monthly activity days and advocacy. <https://www.friendsoftowerhill.org/projects>

⁶ Hampton, J.O. et al. (2023) 'Highlighting the risk of environmental lead contamination for Deer Management in Australia', *Ecological Management & Restoration*, 24(2–3), pp. 128–136. doi:10.1111/emr.12584.

Mandatory knowledge testing must progress urgently

A Victorian Game Management Authority survey of duck shooter knowledge showed that at the absolute best, a maximum of 20% of duck shooters understand hunting law and practice.⁷ The failure of most duck shooters to understand how to undertake the practice is deeply alarming, and supports animal rights advocacy tenet that the practice is unethical.⁸

If the government is serious about trying to make hunting “safe, humane and sustainable”, it must make knowledge and proficiency testing mandatory for all new and existing hunters.

We note that the MCA weighted scores (RIS, page 4, table 3) support *Option 4: Mandatory knowledge testing (animal welfare and knowledge testing)* as having the highest cost-benefit score.

While we appreciate further consultation is needed, we are concerned this change – promised by the government in response to the inquiry – was left out of this suite of changes to the regulations.

Mandatory knowledge testing must be urgently implemented to reduce the risk of wounding.

Species identification

All hunters should be required to pass a species identification test without exemptions – including non-Australian residents and people aged between 12 and 17 years of age. Further, the species identification test should need to be re-taken at intervals to ensure refreshed knowledge.

It’s concerning that, as stated in the RIS, ‘Of all new licences issued each year, around nine per cent complete the Waterfowl Identification Test, and around seven per cent complete the Hound Hunting Test’. This implies the vast majority of hunters are having their licenses renewed with no up-to-date evidence that they are capable of correctly identifying species.

All hunters regardless of age or nationality should be required to pass a species identification test as a requirement of their license, as well as further refresher tests at minimum 5 year intervals.

⁷ See: https://www.gma.vic.gov.au/_data/assets/pdf_file/0007/614194/GMA-Hunters-Knowledge-Survey-Report.pdf.

⁸ See: <https://animalsaustralia.org/our-work/shooting-and-hunting/duck-shooting/>.

Economic benefits of hunting over estimated

We question the economic benefit of hunting stated in the RIS. The figures are based on a single non peer-reviewed report by RMCG Consulting.

Other reports, such as independent economic analysis undertaken by The Australia Institute, have found that the economic benefit to the Victorian economy during duck and quail hunting seasons is close to \$0, and the benefit of banning duck shooting to be at around \$60 million per annum.⁹ There is evidence that should recreational duck shooting be banned, those who would otherwise participate in the activity would undertake other recreational activities such as hunting other species (notably feral pests such as deer), fishing, boating or camping.¹⁰

Approximately less than half of 0.1% of the Victorian population hold a duck hunting licence, and those numbers are declining.¹¹ During duck shooting season parks and wetlands that might otherwise attract other recreational activities such as camping, hiking, or birdwatching, are unsafe or unavailable, and deny regional communities the economic benefits of that visitation.

Alternative economic findings should at least be considered in a RIS, rather than basing economic benefits of hunting on a single report.

If you would like further information please contact Jordan Crook, VNPA Nature Conservation Campaigner jordan@vnpa.org.au, 0401635573 to discuss these important issues.

Yours Sincerely,



Jordan Crook

**Parks and Nature Campaigner
Victorian National Parks Association**



Greg Foyster

**Rivers and Nature Campaign Manager
Environment Victoria**

⁹ See: https://australiainstitute.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/PB-44-Out-for-a-duck_0.pdf, p. 3.

¹⁰ See: https://australiainstitute.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/PB-44-Out-for-a-duck_0.pdf, p. 4 - 5.

¹¹ See: https://australiainstitute.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/PB-44-Out-for-a-duck_0.pdf, p. 4.