

SHOT SHUTDOWN

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DUCK hunters from the local area, Bendigo and Melbourne were devastated to learn at the weekend that Kerang's lakes and wetlands have been closed to duck shooting this year.

A total of 30 wetlands across the state were closed off for this season to protect rare or threatened species from mistakenly being shot.

On the list of closed-off sites was Kerang's Koorangie State Game Reserve, including the Marshes, Lake Bael Bael and Little Lake Bael Bael, due to concerns of harming threatened freckled duck and breeding waterbirds.

Danny Ryan from the Victorian Duck Hunters Association said he was "deeply disappointed" at Environment Minister Steve Dimopoulos' decision on Sunday afternoon.

"The government has taken this long to announce the closures, and also the closures don't make any sense at all whatsoever," Mr Ryan said.

"These closures are similar to building a freeway and then saying 'even though you have a car and a driver's licence, you're not allowed to use it'.

"I know people that have set up

camp in the wetlands since Saturday, who've called me on Sunday because all of the sudden they found out that they have wasted their time."

Mr Ryan said it would impact tourism in the Gannawarra Shire.

"The closure of the Kerang wetlands will have a dramatic effect on income in the area. It has some of the best state game reserves in the state, which were paid for by hunters. These

reserves were set aside for hunting, not bird watching or any other activity," he said.

Mr Ryan claimed there were very few protected species near Kerang to meet the threshold to close the wetlands and that the Australasian shoveler should be reclassified as a game bird.

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Hunters were given notice on the weekend of sudden wetland closures by Environment Minister Steve Dimopoulos.

Duck hunting season set to open

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"The hardhead duck was removed off the threatened list and the work is being done to have the Australasian shoveler off that same list after they were both added to the threatened list with some questionable information," he said.

Victorians Opposed to Duck Shooting (RVOTDS) welcome the closures after calling for several public wetlands to be closed off ahead of the season.

The regional not-for-profit association consists of farmers, business owners and conservation enthusiasts who have "had enough of the unnecessary adverse impacts that bird hunting imposes on community, lives and livelihoods".

In a letter to Environment Minister Steve Dimopoulos, RVOTDS listed the sites to be closed due to the impacts of shooting to threatened species, nearby homes, public health and safety, as well as adverse social and economic impacts to local communities near the sites.

"Times have changed since the 1950s," they wrote. "One in four Victorians now live regionally. More visitors are interested in nature-based activity like birdwatching - in fact, over a million domestic tourists now, according to latest tourism data.

"These visitors won't visit regional towns where guns are blasting".

"Less than half of one per cent of the population partake in recreational native duck shooting. Yet due to antiquated laws, they are permitted to do so at tens of thousands of public lakes, creeks, streams, creeks, rivers, wetlands, reservoirs and wa-

terways around Victoria, (so many that the regulator cannot possibly monitor them for what is shot), unless the Minister steps in to close them."

However, Mr Ryan claims that anti-hunting groups have misrepresented data.

"There has been 300,000 birds harvested last season and if the anti-hunting groups say that there's a 25 per cent wounding rate, then that means there should be tens of thou-

sands of wounded birds, but actually there are only about 50 wounded birds recovered each year," he said.

Kerang resident Kate Bossence has been rescuing birdlife from wetlands all over Victoria during hunting season for the last 28 years.

"I've lost count of how many birds I've pulled out, both dead and alive," she said.

Ms Bossence believes that shooters damage local habitats as well as wound other species of animals in the area.

"It breaks my heart to see the damage that duck shooters do to the wetlands year after year," she said.

"They come up here and shoot at anything that moves and more often than not, they leave the animals there to die."

Lake Boort, which is a popular duck hunting site, is also home to the largest collection of Indigenous heritage scarred trees in the world.

The trees, which Ms Bossence alleges that hunters have damaged, hold cultural significance to the Dja Dja Wurrung people as the scars provide information on how their ancestors lived thousands of years ago.

"I have friends who live in Boort and their property backs onto the wetland and duck shooters have cut scar trees over and over again and have used them for firewood," Ms Bossence said.

"They have also trodden over cooking mounds and ceremonial sites that are culturally significant to First Nations People."

Swan Hill Fishing & Shooting proprietor Rebecca Orlando said a duck hunting ban would affect her business.

"Most of my customers that I'm on a first-name basis with, go duck hunting," Ms Orlando said.

"It would reduce the products I carry for the customers that do partake in it."

Ms Orlando's main concern is about population control to protect farm crops and other bird species from paralyzing infections such as avian botulism.

"Controlling the population of any animal is important because if it

gets out of hand, it will cause its own problems," she said.

As duck hunters and animal rights activists continue to ruffle each other's feathers, Ms Orlando believes that the efforts of animal rights activists won't achieve anything.

"I don't believe that animal rights activists are any more concerned about animal welfare than their own agendas," she said.

"You've only got to look at how they barricade highways in the city for attention when they're not achieving anything and are just wasting taxpayer funds and wasting the public's time."

"And I don't believe there's any place in our country society for such behaviour."

The remaining wetlands will be open for shooting from April 10 to June 5, with the daily bag limit of six ducks per day.

Apart from owning a valid Game and Firearms Licence, hunters must also pass a Waterfowl Identification Test.