

Recreational Cruelty – Native Duck & Quail Shooting

Which Species Are Shot in Tasmania?

Of around ten species of native ducks typically found in Tasmania, the five most common species are subjected to ongoing persecution by shooters, while the remainder enjoy full protection. The persecuted species are: Mountain Duck; Wood Duck; Pacific Black Duck; Grey Teal; and Chestnut Teal. One species of quail, Brown Quail, is targeted by recreational shooters, while other quail species have full protection. Refer species sheets for more details on each of these persecuted species.

History & 'Traditions'

The idea of shooting wild ducks arrived in Tasmania with the first white settlers in the late eighteenth century. In order to regulate shooting and egg-taking, hunting during the breeding season was stopped in 1860. A bag limit was imposed in 1929 to further restrict shooting. A halving of the bag limit occurred by 1972, by which time the open shooting season was reduced to three months.

Many shooters today openly admit that they shoot native birds simply for enjoyment. Fortunately the idea of killing living beings for fun has become socially unacceptable. Public opinion favours an end to recreational shooting of native ducks and quails. This has led to a large decrease in the number of registered shooters.

Duck and quail shooting continues, it seems, largely on the grounds of 'tradition', as if tradition can be justification for killing innocent wildlife. In 2007 a poll of Victorians indicated 75% were in favour of an end to duck shooting. Already several states have responded to this level of community feeling by ending duck and quail shooting. Tasmania is yet to do so!

Current Issues

Open seasons on native ducks continue amid claims of significant impacts on crops and pasture. Crop protection permits are also routinely issued to farmers claiming damage by native ducks.

Grey Teal, Pacific Black Ducks and Wood Ducks are accused of causing significant damage to cultivated crops, including rice, and are targeted as 'pests'. While the issue of rice predation does not directly apply to Tasmania, the excuse is used as a general defence of duck shooting across Australia. The issue is also relevant as some native ducks are highly migratory, regularly crossing Bass Strait in both directions.

Studies in the early 1900s questioned the impact that ducks actually have on crops. It was found

that ducks had little effect on rice production except where crops were poorly managed, particularly where weeds were present. Unevenly graded rice fields caused waterlogging so that plants grew poorly or died, and in these open areas ducks tended to land in large numbers and exacerbate the damage. Weed proliferation attracted ducks that fed on the weeds, and inadvertently damaged the rice plants.

The rice industry alleged native ducks caused \$5 million damage in one year. By contrast, surveys of rice growers revealed that the extent of the problem was only 1-4% of total crop value. Despite such small losses, 89% of growers invest in duck control. However, evidence shows that shooting on wetlands does not stop ducks damaging crops elsewhere.

Wood Ducks and Mountain Ducks are blamed for eating and fouling pasture, particularly adjacent to farm dams and other water bodies. Whilst Wood Ducks will eat young green vegetables, emerging grain and irrigated crops, feeding by day and night, there is a lack of evidence of the extent of the damage in Tasmania. Despite this lack, destruction permits are issued for these two species. This reactive approach achieves only short-term effects (Refer Deterrents and Alternatives).

Claims against native ducks are often made without considering the continuing decline in native waterbird habitat. Conversion of native habitat (wetlands) to agricultural land is a large part of the reason native waterbird numbers are declining, and they are seeking alternative habitat. Their use of agricultural lands is a response to the provision of a readily available food supply that has displaced their natural feeding sources.

Brown Quail, by contrast, are not accused of damaging crops, and yet they are shot in large numbers purely for 'sport' and a mere mouthful of flesh. For what have they done wrong other than having been born as quail? This is simply a case of people shooting innocent creatures to get their thrills.

Open Shooting Seasons

Ducks

The five species of native ducks described are considered 'game species' in Tasmania. For three months of every year (March to June) native ducks are subjected to an open shooting season on some public wetlands and on private land. Around 35,000 native ducks are 'bagged' by close to 1000 licensed duck shooters in Tasmania each year, with a 'bag limit' of 10 ducks per day.

A shotgun, that issues a spray of pellets, is used

to shoot ducks in flight. Many are 'finished off' on the water, if still alive after falling from the sky. Often dogs are used to retrieve shot ducks. Shooters wear camouflage clothing, use hides to conceal their presence, and often use groups of lifelike plastic ducks, called decoys, and duck whistles to trick ducks into landing nearby.

As ducks are most active early in the morning and in the late afternoon/evening, the shooting is allowed to start 1 hour before dawn, and end 1 hour after sunset. At these times it is virtually impossible to identify one type of duck from another.

Open seasons are held each year in Tasmania and the Northern Territory. Victoria and South Australia have had moratoria on shooting in bad drought years, but Tasmania has continued with an open season each time. The more progressive states (Western Australia, New South Wales and Queensland) have ended recreational native duck (and quail) shooting. The ACT has never allowed shooting.

Quail

Brown Quail are also considered to be a 'game species'. For Brown Quail there is an open shooting season of four weeks during May across the State (though only as a two year trial in the south in 2011 and 2012). There is a bag limit of 20 per day.

Quail hunting is done in grasslands and fields, largely on private land. Quail are hunted with shotguns and dogs, who use scent to 'flush' groups (coveys) of quail from the cover of long grasses. The coveys burst from cover in all directions when frightened, a strategy to minimise the number being attacked. They fly a short distance and then run. Relentless shooters proceed to track, with the use of their dogs, and kill as many of the covey as they can find.

Each year about 8000 Brown Quail are killed by about 200 registered quail shooters in Tasmania.

Wounding

Wounding is a strong argument for ending duck and quail shooting. Duck shooting usually involves firing at a passing flock of ducks. Computer simulations of shooting with shotguns show that more than half of ducks aimed at were missed or wounded on the first shot. Subsequent shots fired might eventually 'bag' a duck, while other ducks have been hit and continued flying or dived and swum away injured. It was found that most competent shooters will average one bird wounded for each bird bagged. Field studies show wounding (crippling) rates of one in two. These rates are unacceptably high.

It is recognised that in the 'heat of the moment' people (and non-humans) will appear to continue to function 'normally' for a while after a severe injury. Ducks behave this way, flying on after being shot, or diving below the water to escape if unable to fly. This is just a short-term coping mechanism that in no way ensures survival. Most

What can you do?

- There is no necessity to hunt wild animals for food. Refuse to eat wild native animals and educate your friends and family about the suffering these birds endure in the name of 'recreation'.
- Lobby the Tasmanian Government to ban the open duck and quail seasons and provide full protection for these species under the Wildlife Regulations 1999.
- Ask that the government suggest alternatives to killing for farmers experiencing duck problems, rather than just handing out crop protection permits.
- Enjoy passive recreation with native wildlife (bird-watching, bushwalking) and learn about their place in the local ecology by studying these fascinating birds in more detail.

wounded ducks will suffer painfully and die within a few days from their injuries or infection.

Using shotguns to kill anything is a hit and miss affair. It has been reported that the number of shots fired to kill a duck ranges from four to 10. It can be assumed that quail shooting is equally inaccurate, as they are also shot with shotguns and are a fast-moving target.

Deterrents & Alternatives

Proper management of grains, crops and pasture is most effective in controlling problems of native duck predation. There are various methods of tackling the problem, but the first step is to determine whether there really is a problem. The level of damage may be quite small, and sometimes the cost of addressing this may exceed the cost of the damage itself. Other times the very act of 'controlling' alleged pests creates a new problem (e.g. flourishing numbers of insects pests when native ducks - their predators - are removed). Often tolerance and understanding is the most effective management tool.

Some ways of deterring or minimizing the damage from native ducks are:

- Planting sacrificial crops
- Planting away from lakes and dams, or establishing a tall vegetarian barrier between crops and dams
- Use scaring devices.

See Fact Sheet No. 8 and our website for more detailed information. Brown Quail, too, may have their beneficial place in farmland ecology. Their cousins the Stubble Quail are considered supreme weed seed destroyers among native birds. Perhaps there is something that is yet to be fully understood about their ecological niche.