

Duck Shooting - The Campaign hots up!

Patty Mark, Animal Liberation Magazine, January - March 1987

The seasonal carnage of duck shooting, a cruel and abhorrent practice, is permitted and condoned by all state governments across Australia. Victoria leads in the slaughter with the largest number of licensed duck shooters; at least 80,000. NSW follows with 11,000 and in Tasmania, South Australia, West Australia and Queensland the numbers are much lower, 4,000 down to 1,500.

The bloodsport of duck shooting cannot be justified. If people are compelled to shoot at something there is clearly the alternative of clay pigeon shooting. Hunting animals is not a sport, but a one-sided massacre.

What enjoyment can be gained from shooting and killing living creatures? A most disturbing element of duck shooting is the campfire macho-camaraderie aided by alcohol. Still drunk the morning after, the shooter will shoot at any bird or anything that moves in order to gain social approval.

All birds, protected or not, suffer in the bloodsport. In Victoria this year the combination of an early opening season and the extended breeding season gives the birds few chances of survival. At the beginning of the shooting season the majority of the young are still flappers and many adult birds are in the middle of their post-breeding moult. Moulting birds cannot fly and are illegally shot on the water.

The Animal Liberation campaign in Victoria to stop duck hunting is receiving unprecedented media coverage. It is well and truly bringing the unnecessary suffering and bloodshed out into the open. Patty Mark gives her personal account of the rescue operation on Duck Opening Weekend in Victoria.

I had never known the Geelong Highway to be so empty, but then this was the first time I drove along it at three o'clock in the morning. Occasionally a utility or station wagon would pass us by, towing a boat and loaded with camping gear. The darkness in the car hid my goosebumps. We were all obviously headed for the same place; the lakes and marshes near Geelong for the opening of duck season 1986, but for opposite reasons. Most of the vehicles were loaded up with guns and bullets, ours with a first aid kit and lots of blankets.

For weeks, Animal Liberation with several other groups, including the Australian Wildlife Protection Council and Bird Observers Club had carefully planned our tactics to help save the ducks from the massacre that was about to hit them. We knew we couldn't save all the two million or so ducks, swans, coots, and other gentle birds from the brutal death that shortly awaited them, but we could help some and with first hand evidence of the maiming and slaughter we stood a good chance of stirring public opinion to force a stop to any future season.

At 4a.m. we arrived at our 'base camp'. The day before two activists had surveyed the lake areas to see where we could help birds the most. I felt cold and it was eerie in the night air with people talking in whispers. There were about a dozen of us and we tried to conceal any nervousness we felt about shortly facing up to any army of bloodsport enthusiasts in an opening reverie well known for its drunkenness.

Our only 'ammunition' against them was the presence of the five TV and newspaper reporters and photographers who all appeared near the scene at about 5a.m.

At 6.a.m. we drove in a convoy to one of the most popular shooting spots in the area. A Fisheries and Wildlife Officer was at a makeshift gate directing traffic with a torch. He asked us if we had our permits. We answered, "We aren't here to shoot".

The parking area was crowded with vehicles. Our headlights shone on figures with guns resting on shoulders and ammunition belts draped around hips; it was otherwise completely dark.

Just a few days earlier the official opening time had been changed by the Victorian Minister for Conversation, Joan Kirner, to 7.a.m. instead of 6.a.m. Laurie Levy, an organiser of the rescue campaign had phoned the Minister at 6.a.m. one morning to highlight to her the darkness at this time and how it would be impossible for shooters to be able to recognise each other, much less protected and endangered species of birds.

The camera crews were busy setting up their equipment while reporters took background statements from us in the chilly air; it was still dark. Then at about 6.15a.m. a few shots cracked the stillness and within seconds it sounded like fireworks displayed at Moomba, though instead of brilliant displays of colour, overhead were flocks of birds working their way madly through the sky in all directions. At this time they were mostly dark shapes but towards 7a.m. the graceful long-necked swans were particularly noticeable flying overhead.

When the shadows faltered and dropped into the water or reeds the rage and anguish became unbearable. Our animal rescue team had all read the CSIRO Technical Report 1984 where hunters themselves estimates a crippling loss of 10 to 30% of birds shot. The possibility of giving aid or comfort to maliciously wounded defenceless individuals overshadowed our fear of drunken shooters.

A half hour before the shooting was legally supposed to begin, Matthew Perry, the vice president of Animal Liberation stumbled through the darkness from the swamp. He was out of breath, soaking wet and splattered with mud. When the TV lights focused on him I could see the blood on his shirt. In his hands was the limp body of a dead coot (fully-protected species), those charming creatures that people particularly enjoy at the Botanical Gardens in Melbourne. Matthew and the dead coot were on the front page of the Melbourne Herald a few hours later and on all the TV news programs that night.

He handed me the birds and disappeared again towards the reeds as dawn broke. It was the first time I had been able to hold a dead body. She was still warm. Over and over in my head went the words from the Smith's LP *MEAT IS MURDER* "**This beautiful creature must die a death for no reason, and death for no reason is murder**".

The shooting actually settled down around 7a.m. when it was originally due to start. The 'fireworks melee' had finished and serious killing could begin. It was obvious by the 100 dead protected species we collected that weekend that it didn't matter what the hunters aimed at, as long as it moved, and even sometimes that wasn't necessary.

Within 24 hours I had another dead coot in my arms, this one closely watching me with his deep red eyes. The bullet wound was in his back and occasionally his head would make strange movements. We found him at Lake Murdeduke only 15 metres off shore and got to him before he slipped under and drowned. I held him wrapped in a blanket against me for the 40 minute drive to veterinary attention. I still have contact with his red eyes.

We took 17 injured birds to the Jirralingha Wildlife Rescue Centre (Taits Road, Barwon Heads) that weekend. Teree Gordon manages the Centre and is well known for her miraculous efforts to rehabilitate injured wildlife after the Ash Wednesday bush fires. Her determined efforts along with

veterinary assistance managed to save and rehabilitate 10 of the birds including the red-eyed coot. (The Rescue Centre is run totally on donations).

Over 20 more rescue workers from Melbourne joined us in the Geelong area that weekend. We also had other teams working in the major duck shooting areas throughout the state.

That weekend our effort alone collected the bodies of 117 fully-protected animals including swans, turtles, ibis and endangered freckled ducks. A 1982 Victorian Government Survey on Duck Opening issues by Dr. Ian Norman of the Arthur Rylah Institute reported that the 1982 duck season opening found 1,555 protected birds of 34 species shot over 13 lakes. This accounted for birds that were located, retrieved and found in bags. But did not account for the total numbers of protected species shot and crippled or those who died without being found.

On the Monday after opening weekend we took over 100 dead 'protected' animals to the Victorian Cabinet to ask Joan Kirner, Minister for the Conservation, and other members of the Victorian Government, to stop the brutal and unnecessary suffering and ban duck season. We waited next to the dead bodies for ten hours. Joan Kirner wouldn't come and face the blood and smell of the rotting defenceless birds allowed to die. She only agreed to a closed press conference well away from the evidence. She also refused to discuss the deaths with our spokesperson Laurie Levy.

I had met Joan Kirner for the first time almost a year before during a meeting between Animal Liberation and the Ministry for Conservation on steel-jawed traps. I had held her in esteem and respected her previous work for children in the school system and her strong standards for the 'underdogs' and the defenceless. I remember shaking her hand and telling her how excited I felt that in seven years of meeting various Ministers, this was the first time I had met one who was a woman.

In her press conference Joan Kirner blasted the animal rescue workers for exhibitionism and disrupting the work of her enforcement officers. (Her enforcement offices were more often concerned with disrupting our efforts to rescue suffering birds than with prosecuting hunters for illegal killing of protected animals). The Department of Conservation employs 33 enforcement officers to police over 80,000 duck shooters throughout Victoria.

There was no show of thanks for the rescued lives of the deserted birds left to die alone and in agony by the hunters. There was no show of concern from Joan Kirner for the thousands of birds that are now, as you read this, still facing the same tortures.

People who have written to Joan Kirner about the ducks received this in reply:

"...As it stands at the moment, duck shooting is supported by a large section of the community. The hunting of wild duck is an activity which has been carried out since white settlement, and it is also pursued to the best of my knowledge in every State in Australia.

My task is to make provision for this activity and to control it, to ensure the long-term conservation of hunted species and to minimise accidental or irresponsible shooting of protected species...

While there remains a clear indication of community support for this activity, and while it can be managed so as to prevent a threat to the long-term conservation of any species, I see no justification in considering an end to duck hunting in Victoria..." Joan Kirner, Victorian Minister for Conservation.

Rescue work continues

There will be more rescue operations before the Victorian season ends on May 31. A team of Victorian animal liberationists joined with members of the South Australian Branch of Animal Liberation to rescue birds on Open Day (March 8) at Bool Lagoon in SA near the Victorian border. Bool Lagoon is a sanctuary for freckled duck. During this effort a 17 year-old rescue worker was arrested for going to the aid of a suffering bird that was shot down. He spent 3 hours in a jail cell and two weeks later all charged against him were dismissed. The bird died.

ACTION

Victorians write to Joan Kirner, Minister for Conservation, 240 Victoria Parade, East Melbourne Vic. 3002 and tell her she is not addressing the main issue; CRUELTY. State it is just not “a matter of long-term conservation of any species”, but the maiming, blinding, terrorising and killing of sentient animals. Call Animal Liberation Vic. 63 9174 and order petition forms for signature against duck season to show Joan Kirner that a “large section of the community” **doesn't** support this cruelty. Other States write to your local Minister for Conservation and demand that duck season be banned in your State.