

HUNTING FOR CONSERVATION

ISSUE 3 – FEBRUARY 2024

**Missed opportunity
in South Australia**

**Henhouses installed
at Dunyak Moira**

**Feral cat removal allows
native wildlife to thrive**

**Hunters contribute to
international waterbird
studies**

The original conservationists

Field & Game Australia

Field & Game Australia has a long and credible history of wildlife and habitat management. We seek to create, rehabilitate and preserve wetland environments for the benefit of the native flora and fauna that depend on these places to survive.

We also seek to improve habitat so that we may continue our sustainable harvest of free-range, healthy protein for our tables, and firmly believe that hunting in general and native game bird hunting in particular not only has a place in our community but is integral to the survival of hundreds of species, not just native game ducks or stubble quail.

For the uninitiated, the practice of hunting may seem a little confronting – but we hope that those who take the time to understand the tangible and immediate benefits that our efforts and our members contribute to protecting and conserving the environments we value so dearly, will see the enormous benefit our activities deliver to the health and wellbeing of hundreds of thousands of Australians each and every year.

Field & Game Australia is a legitimate and verified steward in the conservation of wetland and other related habitats for sustainable use by its communities, which include but are not limited to hunters, naturalists, and recreationalists who seek an

authentic connection with nature. Through our own acquired wetland reserves and in collaboration with authorities in the preservation of State Game Reserves, Field & Game Australia's legacy has endured since 1958.

Field & Game Australia freely accepts its custodial responsibilities for these resources, because current and future generations benefit when we do our job well.



Wetlands Environmental Taskforce

Field & Game Australia's public conservation fund Wetlands Environmental Taskforce (WET) Trust was formed in 2002 with the purpose of purchasing, restoring and maintaining wetland habitats.

Wildlife scientists admit that the loss of habitat is the single greatest threat to all native birds – and Victoria has lost more than 37% of its wetland areas to activities such as land clearing and draining since European settlement. About 90% of this loss has occurred on private land. If not for the tireless work of Field & Game Australia, WET and countless volunteers since 1958, many more areas would have been lost

through commercial development or total abandonment.

In Victoria, several species of native game birds including the hardhead, blue-wing shoveler, blue-billed duck and the musk duck have been considerably affected through the alteration or loss of habitat, reflecting a continuing need for our wetland restoration and conservation programs.

Our role as an environmental advocate and champion of wetland preservation is demonstrated through more than 20 wetland environments that we care for. In fact, 11 of Victoria's wetlands are so

important that they are internationally recognised under the Ramsar Convention on Wetlands. Victoria's Ramsar sites are home to as many as 1,300 species of native plants and 450 of native animals, including more than 100 species of waterbirds.

Our wetlands require long-term ongoing conservation efforts from our dedicated hunter-conservationists, and this work must continue if they are to endure.



Missed opportunity for sustainable hunting and conservation

In the realm of wildlife management, the principle of 'ethical and sustainable use' is paramount, guiding the responsible stewardship of natural resources.

In South Australia however, the government's approach to managing what it has identified as a burgeoning feral deer population seems to bypass this principle. The state's Feral Deer Eradication Program, with its objective of near-total eradication, raises significant questions about wastage and the ethical considerations of wildlife management.

South Australia currently has a wild deer population estimated at around 40,000. The government says this rapidly growing population poses threats to primary industries, public safety, and the environment. The Strategic Plan for the South Australian Feral Deer Eradication Program 2022-2032 aims for "effective eradication" – reducing the population to less than 1000. The primary method? Aerial culling, wherein deer are located using thermal imaging and dispatched by professional shooters from helicopters.

The carcasses are left to decompose where they fall, a glaring example of resource wastage.

A better way forward

In stark contrast, other Australian states manage deer as a valued resource, incorporating them into broader wildlife management strategies. These strategies often involve recreational hunters.

At Field & Game Australia we acknowledge and encourage recognition of the fact that deer hunters are generally motivated at least partially by the prize of a very valuable meat resource. This "consumptive hunting" – hunting for meat – generally generates much higher levels of ethics, as the resource is valued and respected. These hunters play a crucial role in managing wildlife populations, simultaneously contributing to conservation efforts and deriving sustenance from their activities.

A short-sighted approach

The South Australian government's stance, focused on eradication rather than management, not only overlooks the potential for sustainable hunting but also potentially sets the stage for future challenges. By leaving a residual population of about 1000 deer, the issue of deer

management is not resolved but merely postponed. This approach seems short-sighted, especially when considering the success of sustainable hunting practices in other regions.

The current legislation also restricts individual hunters to private lands, requiring written landowner permission, while the government exercises more extensive culling rights. This policy disparity not only limits the potential contributions of hunters in managing deer populations but also raises ethical concerns. Ground shooting, a more humane method, is overlooked in favour of the more distressing aerial culling.

More balance needed

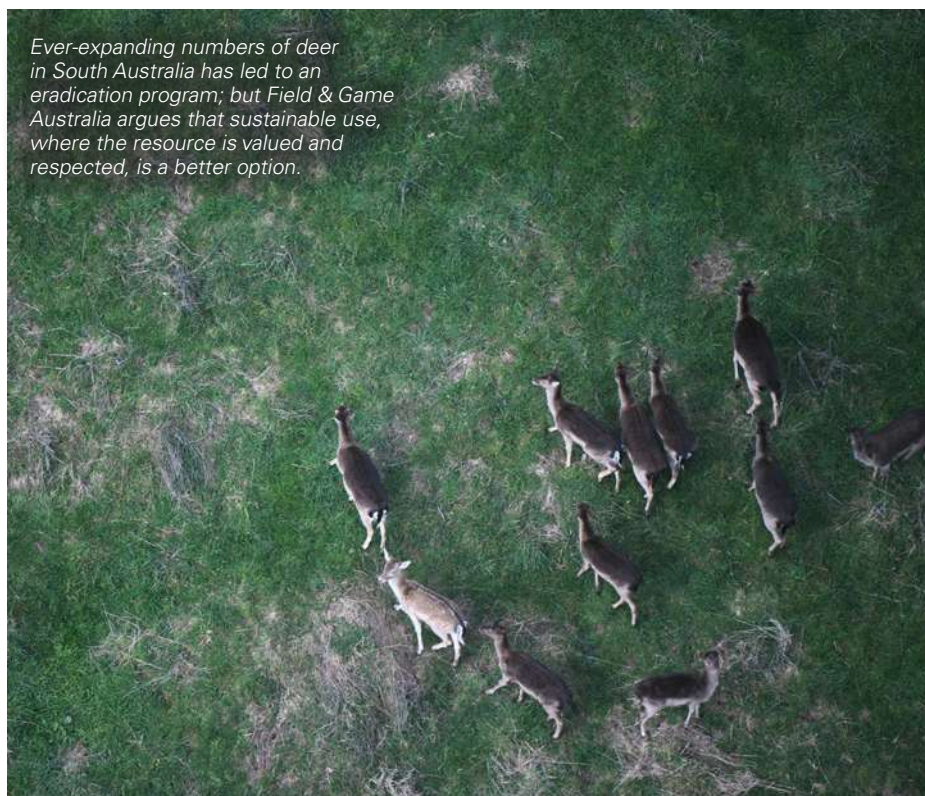
At Field & Game Australia, we advocate for a more collaborative, sustainable approach, admitting that at times, both methods have their place. Expanding opportunities for volunteer hunting on public lands would enhance the eradication program's effectiveness while ensuring

responsible use of this valuable protein source. A collaborative strategy, integrating the efforts of volunteer hunters with conservation goals, could lead to a more balanced, ethical, and effective deer management plan.

Introducing licensing and controlled seasons increases the ability of regulators to control and/or focus hunting efforts, and also generates revenue into the public coffers.

South Australia's current approach, while aiming for ecological balance, misses an opportunity to engage a community committed to ethical and sustainable wildlife use. As hunters, we have a vested interest in the welfare and sustainable use of animals. Our practices reflect a deep respect for nature and a commitment to conservation. It's time for policies to reflect a more holistic, ethical approach to wildlife management, recognizing the value of sustainable hunting as a key component in the broader conservation effort.

Ever-expanding numbers of deer in South Australia has led to an eradication program; but Field & Game Australia argues that sustainable use, where the resource is valued and respected, is a better option.





Proud involvement in project

Shepparton Field & Game has been fortunate to be involved in a project with Goulburn Valley Water at the decommissioned Merrigum water treatment plant.

In partnership with Burnanga Indigenous Fishing Club, GV Water has transformed the disused water treatment plant into a new space named Duniyak Moira, where people can access water-related recreational activities in Merrigum and reconnect with nature.

Works to transform the site began in mid-2021 and included the rehabilitation of two storage lagoons – one 50 megalitres and the other 12.5 megalitres – and the complete revegetation of the site not only on land but also in the water where aquatic plants have helped to create animal refuges. Donated concrete pipes and root-balls from storm-damaged trees were installed on the lake beds to create fish habitat, and almost 100 large native fish – including Murray cod and golden perch – have been relocated into the lakes in partnership with the Victorian Fisheries Authority.

The development of the site also involved partnerships with a number of local businesses and organisations, including Shepparton Field & Game which was instrumental in installing duck nesting

boxes on both lakes.

The branch's David Cox said GV Water had shown much support for the conservation work undertaken by the branch, and branch members felt privileged to be included in the project.

"GV Water has done an amazing rehabilitation of the site," David said.

"They have also created beautiful areas for both humans and wildlife.

"Shepparton FGA have loved being part of the project," he said.

"It will be an outstanding area for the Merrigum community and the Burnanga fishing club."

Duniyak Moira was opened on October 11 by Goulburn Valley Water Board chairman Mark Stone.

Mr Stone said he hoped Duniyak Moira would leave a lasting legacy for the community.

"Duniyak Moira is testament to what can be achieved through a shared vision, collaboration and a passion to create

beneficial outcomes," he said.

Burnanga Indigenous Fishing Club president Corey Walker sees by Duniyak Moira as an opportunity to promote the preservation of culture and mental well-being – goals that Field & Game Australia wholeheartedly supports.

He said the opportunities offered by Duniyak Moira would continue to create positive impacts for many local groups and communities.

"This will be great for the Merrigum community and for the broader local fishing community as well to have a new fishing spot," he said.

"These lakes will also help us encourage more people to get out fishing, including young people, and will create opportunities for us to pass down knowledge to younger generations."

The lakes will be catch-and-release only, to help protect the native fish.

To find out more about Duniyak Moira, including opening times, visit gvwater.vic.gov.au/duniyak-moira

Eight henhouses and six nesting boxes are in place at the two Dunyak Moira fishing dams.



Dunyak Moira offers pontoons from which catch-and-release fishing activities can be enjoyed.



Dunyak Moira is a place where people can access water-related recreational activities in Merrigum and reconnect with nature.



Shepparton FGA's David Cox and Rick Bertoli at the FGA stand at the opening of Dunyak Moira.



David Cox with examples of the henhouses that have been installed across Victoria.



Dunyak Moira was opened on October 11 by Goulburn Valley Water Board chairman Mark Stone.



Henhouses help breeding success

Field & Game members installed henhouses and nesting boxes at the two Dunyak Moira dams in December 2021 and July 2022.

"We have eight henhouses and six nesting boxes on the two dams," David said.

"Virtually one breeding season they have been in use; we have had outstanding breeding success with 33 clutches hatched: 23 Pacific black duck, seven grey teal and three chestnut teal."

The wooden boxes were made by students engaged in Pit Stop – a program which aims to increase work and life skills of young people – funded by a grant obtained by Greater Shepparton Lighthouse Project, while the henhouses were made and funded by Shepparton and Seymour Field & Game branches and FGA's Wetlands Environmental Taskforce.

David said at one point the henhouse project was in real jeopardy across the Shepparton region because of predation by crows.

"The worst area for predation was at the GV water dams," David said.

"We lost 12 clutches including two clutches from boxes. I thought we may have to take the henhouses down, if we couldn't keep the crows out."

Faced with this problem, David designed "crow stopper" boxes – which have no perch – in the hope it would solve the issue.

"At this early stage they have been a great success, with no egg losses recorded," he said.

So successful has the "crow stopper" been in fact, Shepparton Field & Game has heard that US hunting and preservation organisation Delta Waterfowl is considering doing trials with similar designs to boost clutch survival during the incubation period of North American waterfowl.

Hunters help international waterbird research

Regardless of what the future may hold for duck hunting in this country, the conservation efforts of Field & Game Australia volunteers continue unabated.

This spring, FGA members happily put their hands up and donated frozen duck samples to help fill gaps in research being undertaken by Dr Philip Lavretsky from the University of Texas (El Paso) and Museum of Wildlife and Fish Biology curator Andrew Engilis from the University of California (Davis), who have been collecting duck samples in Victoria and the Northern Territory with the aim of furthering Dr Lavretsky's Pacific black duck studies and increasing knowledge of Australian bird diversity.

During the course of 10 days, hunters in southern and northern Australia donated more than 80 birds, representing 10 species of endemic Australian waterfowl.

The specimens will help the Museum of Wildlife and Fish Biology fulfil its goal of housing most of the world's diversity of

waterfowl, some 140 species. They will also be used for further research and education purposes.

Joining in the data collection efforts were FGA hunting and conservation manager Glenn Falla, FGA Board vice-chairman Trent Leen and Board member Paul Sharp, as well as Get Ducks' Ramsey Russell. Thanks must also go to NT Field & Game branch and Safari Club International for their support.

"We could not have been successful without our friends and hunters from Field & Game Australia, particularly Glenn Falla who worked closely with the MWFB during the planning phases and during our visit," a statement from the Museum of Wildlife and Fish Biology said.

Also during the expedition, blood samples were collected for the WA Department of

Health for research into flaviviruses – such as Japanese encephalitis virus (JEV), the Kunjin strain of West Nile virus, and Murray Valley encephalitis virus.

It is widely believed that waterbirds – particularly wading birds, such as herons and egrets – form the primary natural reservoir for JEV; however experimental studies have indicated that birds of other taxa could also be part of the reservoir community, with chickens and domestic ducks developing viremia (viruses in the blood) when infected with JEV.

Recently, the first-ever natural JEV-viraemia in wild game bird species in Australia was detected in two Pacific black ducks and one Pacific black duck hybrid – emphasizing the need for continuing data collection and research in this area.

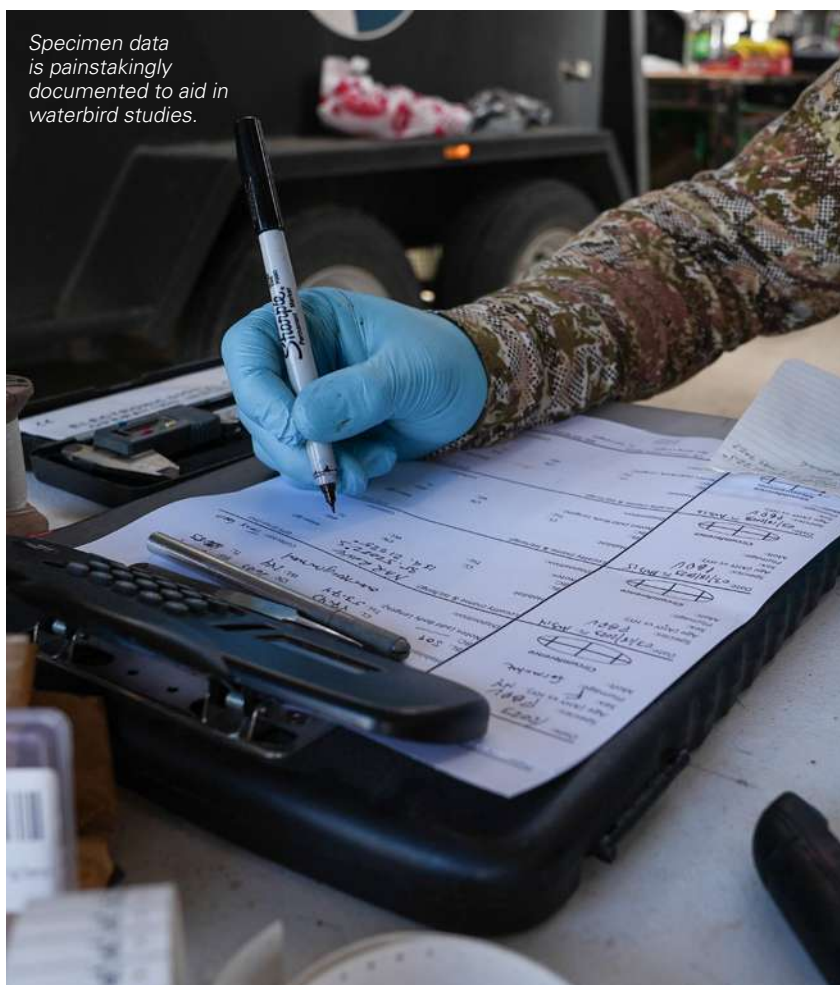


Dr Lavretsky expertly skins a waterbird.

Dr Philip Lavretsky, of the University of Texas, prepares a waterbird for scientific study, while Museum of Wildlife and Fish Biology curator Andrew Engilis Jr. records data in the background, watched on by Ramsey Russell.



Specimen data is painstakingly documented to aid in waterbird studies.



Samples collected for research.



Feral cat crisis: A battle for biodiversity

Australia's unique and diverse ecosystems have long been under threat from invasive species that are not native to this country.

Some of those species were purposely introduced for various reasons that seemed like a good idea at the time; the European red fox and European wild rabbits, for example, were let loose in the 1850s for hunting purposes – but both of these pests have gone on to create huge problems for native wildlife.

Rabbits compete with native animals for food and shelter on an epic scale and can also destroy pasture and crops, while a single fox is estimated to consume about 400g of food a night – killing many animals in the process but only eating a small portion of each. With a yearly tally per fox of about 150kg of prey made up of perhaps thousands of mammals – including livestock – plus reptiles, birds and insects, their impact is enormous.

But the pest that wears the title of ‘most devastating’ is the feral cat.

“Feral cats kill over 1.5 billion native mammals, birds, reptiles and frogs, and 1.1

billion invertebrates each year in Australia,” the Australian Government’s Department of Climate Change, Energy, the Environment and Water (DCCEEW) says – and to put that number into sharper focus, studies estimate that about one million birds alone are killed by cats in Australia every day.

Feral cats also spread diseases that affect humans, livestock and native animals – further widening their impact on the country and its inhabitants.

“Australia’s most impactful invasive alien vertebrates in terms of biodiversity impacts are feral cats,” the CSIRO’s biosecurity chief research scientist Dr Andy Sheppard says.

Officially ‘feral’

Officially recognised with ‘pest’ status by the Australian Government in 2015, these domesticated cats gone wild now number in the millions and can be found across Australia – from urban localities to the most remote of locations, arid areas to wetlands, and everything in between.

They wreak havoc on native wildlife, contributing to the decline of numerous species and disrupting the delicate balance of Australia’s ecosystems. Their predatory nature poses a significant threat to the

survival of more than 120 native birds, mammals, reptiles, and insects, many of which are found nowhere else on Earth. Their impact is particularly devastating on small marsupials and ground-dwelling birds, many of which lack adequate defences against these voracious and efficient hunters.

According to DCCEEW, feral cats have been responsible for the extinction of some birds and small to medium-sized mammals and are also a major cause of the decline in numbers of endangered species such as the bilby, bandicoot, bettong and numbat.

Control measures

To combat this ecological menace posed by feral cats, Australia has implemented a multi-faceted approach which blends scientific research, public awareness campaigns, and strategic control measures.

There are various approved methods for feral cat control in Australia, although not all are approved in all states and territories. Control methods include trapping, baiting, fencing off at-risk areas, and shooting.

The Threatened Species Strategy, launched in 2015, set a target of culling two million feral cats by 2020. The strategy involved a combination of traditional control methods,



Lewis O'Dwyer (pictured) and his dad Marcus removed about 17 feral cats from a neighbour's farm over the course of two visits.



Community involvement is crucial

Currently, a threat abatement plan to guide and co-ordinate the nation's response to key threats – including feral cats – is under way.

In addition to control programs, community engagement plays a crucial role in managing the feral cat problem.

Conservation organisations work with local communities to raise awareness about the impact of feral cats on native wildlife and encourage responsible pet ownership, including keeping cats indoors and/or in enclosed outdoor runs which allow the animals to be outside but prevented from roaming at will, and the use of collars with bells on roaming domestic cats to give native wildlife a chance to escape.

There is also evidence that habitat availability can play a key role in ensuring the survival of vulnerable native species.

"Habitat loss, degradation and fragmentation greatly increase the hunting efficiency of cats and other feral predators like foxes and wild dogs," says Prof John Woinarski from Charles Darwin University.

"Improving habitat can help to reduce the impact of cats on many threatened species by increasing cover for hiding and making it harder for feral predators to hunt."

Making inroads

While progress has been made, the battle against feral cats is ongoing. Australia continues to invest in research, technology, and community involvement to find effective and humane solutions to this complex issue.

The feral cat problem serves as a stark reminder of the delicate balance between human activities and the preservation of biodiversity, prompting a collective effort to safeguard Australia's unique and irreplaceable ecosystems – and it is here that the contributions of hunters and conservationist members of Field & Game Australia undoubtedly can and do have a positive and enduring impact.

Record feral cat activity

Have you seen a feral cat recently? Record feral cat management activities, including feral cat sightings, eradication and impacts on native species via FeralCatScan – a free app available for download to iPhone and Android devices. Visit www.feralscan.org.au

such as trapping and shooting, as well as innovative approaches like the use of poison baits and the development of a feline-specific virus.

A follow-up review of the strategy estimated 1,581,544 cats were culled during that time, with shooters, hunters and farmers estimated to have had the most impact in the culling process, removing more than 85 per cent of the 1.58 million cats culled during the five-year period.

Goulburn Valley farmer Marcus O'Dwyer and son Lewis are just two of the many Field & Game Australia members whose conservation efforts include the removal of feral cats from the environment.

Marcus and Lewis recently answered the call for help from a neighbouring farmer who'd had the native birdlife on his farm – including tree-dwelling birds such as galahs

and cockatoos – decimated by cats.

"They had a feral cat problem, killing their native birds and their native marsupials, and they rang me up and asked if we'd come and shoot them under spotlight using the shotgun," Marcus said.

"We shot, I think, 12 or 13 by the end of the night; we saw probably another three or four we didn't get.

"They were down in the paddocks, around old sheds ... and there were just piles of feathers everywhere. Everywhere you looked, there were native bird feathers."

A week after that first hunt, Marcus and Lewis went back to the property again and despatched a further five feral cats and a couple of foxes.

"That was the end of them," Marcus said. "There's been none there since – we wiped out the population."

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