

# HUNTING FOR CONSERVATION

ISSUE 1 – MARCH 2023



**Fox control essential for  
wildlife preservation**



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# Advocacy seeks results that benefit all

Welcome to the first edition of *Hunting for Conservation* by the Wetland Environmental Taskforce – an initiative of Field & Game Australia.

FGA was founded in 1958 by hunters who realised that the biggest negative impact on waterfowl populations was the loss of habitat and, more than 60 years later, this fact remains.

Australian wetland scientist Professor Richard Kingsford, the creator of the long-running Eastern Australian Waterbird Survey which is now undertaken by the University of NSW, has said habitat destruction – whether due to climate change, fire, draining of wetlands, regulation of rivers, diversion of water or floodplain management – is the major threat to waterbirds in Australia.

With this irrefutable fact in mind, Wetland Environmental Taskforce – a registered charity – was born in 2002 with the aim of securing, maintaining, and restoring habitat for waterfowl.

The work undertaken by volunteer members of both the taskforce and Field & Game Australia is wide-ranging and has resulted in spectacular successes that benefit not only wetlands, waterfowl, and the myriad other flora and fauna that depend upon these special places for their survival, but also the wider human community.

Our hunter-conservationists use evidence and facts to support our narrative and our work. We engage and respect government departments and look to work in collaboration to deliver sustainable outcomes. One such joint effort is our partnership with Parks Victoria, in which our members' labour and skills are put to good use through the ParksConnect system.

Unfortunately, there is an imbalance between hunter-conservationists and the anti-hunting lobby. Hunter conservationists are committed to respecting the law, and the rights of Australians to disagree and protest. Anti-hunting activists, on the other hand, use tactics both legal and illegal to justify their desired outcomes. Those outcomes may not be in the interest of others, but these activists are convinced that what they want is right and that all others should agree and fall in line regardless.

We have seen in recent years the tactics used by activists. In 2019, for example, vegan activists took direct action to promote their beliefs, bringing the CBDs of capital cities to a standstill. They did not care about how people were going to make it to work, how students were going to get to school, or the impacts on emergency services attending time-critical incidents. Their motive was, and continues to be, gaining attention for their point of view, their desires, their message and their demands – no matter the cost to others. In the extreme, these activists will undertake any activities that promote their

cause, no matter what the effect on others may be, and whether that activity respects or breaks the law.

They also often fail to see the unintended consequences of their actions. One only needs to look at the recent 'wins' in New South Wales for the Animal Justice Party, which has succeeded in getting some local councils to ban the use of 1080 baiting. Now, we can have a debate about the use of 1080 – but what are the unintended consequences of this change? An increase in fox populations, negative impacts to farming, increases in lamb prices, an increased demand for fox control by hunting (something the AJP is against) and the impact to agriculture. Yes, there was a win for the activists, but the question is: At what cost? And further, who pays? Not the activists.

Such behaviour creates great content for the media, which enjoys reporting on the disruption to the norm. This in turn provides oxygen to the activist movement no matter what the topic, and regardless of whether it is based on fact. Often, these organisations do not rely on such conventions as the truth; in reality, evidence and facts often oppose and negate their narrative and so are conveniently missing or are deliberately misinterpreted.

Field & Game Australia and the Wetland Environmental Taskforce advocate for positive outcomes. We are apolitical and desire results that support the community and wetland conservation – whether you are a hunter or bird watcher or just enjoy the peace and calm that visiting a wetland provides.

We also deliver on our promises. We deliver restoration and regeneration projects to improve wetland habitat. We install and maintain hen houses for native ducks

to increase habitat, improve breeding opportunities and encourage higher success rates in broods making it to maturity through better protection from predators. We deliver projects across state game reserves to improve access and opportunities for the community to enjoy their wetland environments and gain the health and wellbeing benefits that spending time in the wilderness has been proven to offer.

We are all about education, sustainability, ethical harvesting and gathering free-range wild food for the table, sharing knowledge and skills in utilisation of the whole animal, and making the most from each animal hunted.

And, while there will always be those who disagree with hunting, even Dr Richard Kingsford has said: "The results are equivocal about the role of hunting in determining waterfowl abundance" and "duck hunting is not a major conservation issue".

We are the 'real' conservationists because we actually do what we say we will; we are doers rather than just talkers. We share our knowledge, we educate, and we deliver tangible results through participation and encouraging others to do the same.

We respect laws and government; and, although we may not always agree with them, we challenge respectfully the views of those who oppose us, rather than looking to impose our values or our desires upon them. We give people a choice: they can get involved and learn, should they wish to, or they can ignore what we do and go about their life largely unimpacted by our activities.

Our advocacy seeks sustainable outcomes and ethical behaviours.

We seek to serve everyone, not just a noisy few.

## Pollies have a day on the clays

Wind, rain, mud, sunshine, food, a posse of pollies aiming at clay targets, and plenty of good fun and friendly banter – that was the scene at Melbourne Gun Club on August 23 for the 19th annual Field & Game Australia Politicians' Shoot.

The shoot was an opportunity for us to talk all things Field & Game with state and federal politicians, continuing our conversations regarding sustainable hunting, State Game Reserves, water allocations, our ongoing conservation efforts, and more.

It was also a chance to showcase the sport of clay target shooting in a fun and safe environment, giving our pollies the chance to learn why we're so passionate about it. Participants also got to sample some great game food into the bargain!

While the weather was not particularly

kind, it didn't deter the eager pollies who lined up for a practise shot with Australian shooting star Anna Shedrina, before heading off in their squads to test their skills against the targets.

In amongst the friendly banter and keen party rivalry there emerged a few hotshots who helped prop up their party teams. The eventual winner on the day was a team from Labor, closely followed by the Nats and Libs.

It was an enjoyable day for all and a great way to promote the economic, environmental and health benefits of the lifestyle we love.



# Who are we?

## Field & Game Australia

Since its very beginnings as a hunter/conservationist-based organisation, Field & Game Australia has been at the forefront of wetland conservation. Its members have often been the first to notice changes in waterfowl habitat and population, and continually seek the reasons behind these changes and how best to counteract them.

As a signatory to the Ramsar Convention which centres on the conservation and sustainable use of wetlands, Australia has more than 8.3 million hectares of Ramsar-listed wetlands – and among them are areas that are wholly or partly Victorian State Game Reserves. Hunting of these areas is compatible with the Ramsar Convention's definition of wise use as "the sustainable use of wetland resources in such a way as to benefit the human community while maintaining their potential to meet the needs and aspirations of future generations."

The idea of maintaining and preserving ecosystems for wise use – including sustainable hunting – by humans, to sustain communities, culture, and recreation aligns closely with Field & Game Australia's mission statement, and we continue to be involved

in efforts to save wetlands in Australia for the hundreds of species – predominately non-game – which depend wholly or partly upon them for their survival.

## Wetlands Environmental Taskforce

With the origins of Field & Game Australia intertwined with preserving wetland habitats, it was a natural progression to form a public fund to assist with this endeavour.

The Wetlands Environmental Taskforce (WET) was formed in 2002 with the purpose of purchasing, restoring and maintaining wetland habitats, and with ownership of the habitats comes the full access required to rehabilitate ecosystems and restore biodiversity.

A prime example of this work in action can be seen at Heart Morass, in Gippsland. A parcel of 819 hectares of the Heart Morass – worn down, depleted by a century of stock grazing, and with salinity issues from saltwater intrusion – was purchased in 2006, with two more parcels of adjoining land acquired in 2010 and 2013. Restoration and conservation started with the 2006 purchase and continues to this day, with more than 50,000 native trees planted, 20 tonnes of introduced (and invasive) carp removed, and seeds collected

from more than 50 native plant species for revegetation.

This work could not have happened without the help of hunters and the Heart Morass project partners: Field & Game Australia, Watermark Inc., Bug Blitz, West Gippsland Catchment Management Authority, and the Hugh Williamson Foundation.

Other projects undertaken by WET include the Australian National Hunting Archive, where the role of hunting in Australia's history and culture is the central focus of a large library and archive; and the project at Connewarre, where Field & Game Australia members have devoted countless hours to the construction of a wetland centre for the purposes of research into wetland habitats, waterfowl nesting and breeding habits, as well as educating hunters and the wider public on the benefits of wetland habitats and hunter-led conservation efforts.

Field & Game Australia and Wetlands Environmental Taskforce don't just talk the talk; we walk it, and we live it.



# Putting best paw forward for effective retrieval

**With the humane treatment of animals a growing consideration worldwide, it is becoming law in some countries that hunters must have an effective gundog in order to be allowed to hunt game.**

Mindful of this fact, Field & Game Australia is on the front foot (or paw) with the recent introduction of the Field & Game Australia Scurry League – demonstrating our commitment to encouraging hunters to have gundogs that are effective and efficient retrievers of wounded and dead game.

Most of us reckon our dogs are fairly clever – and the Scurry League gives owners a chance to show their mates just how fast their four-legged friend is at retrieving, while also honing the dog's skills for those times when it is working in the field.

A scurry is basically a time trial in which each dog races against the clock on a retrieve in a confined space. A basic course consists of two fences about a metre apart, with the end blocked off, about 50 metres long and containing two or three bales of hay which the dog must jump over on its way out to pick up a dummy that has been thrown in the dog's view.

When the dog comes back over the line

with the dummy, the clock stops; the fastest dog on the day wins.

Importantly, we want younger people to have a go as it will introduce them to the wonderful world of gundogs doing what they are bred for: working effectively in the field.

Having a bit of fun like this makes the dogs faster and more reliable retrievers – while supporting FGA in its efforts to help hunters harvest game in the most humane way possible.

Field & Game Australia supports the Game Management Authority's 'Reduce Wounding' campaign and actively encourages its hunter members to work on multiple facets of their hunting skills – including shot placement, effective range, and retrieval strategy – in order to reduce wounding and therefore improve animal welfare outcomes and help ensure duck hunting in Victoria continues to be both sustainable and responsible.





# Polystyrene increasingly a problem

*Polystyrene litter from housing development sites close to wetlands in the Geelong area are a blight on the landscape and a problem for the environment.*



Our commitment to the environment is not just in regard to new projects that benefit our precious native species – we are also committed to cleaning up other people’s mess, where possible, when it impacts native habitat.

The development and expansion of Geelong suburbs has never been faster than it is now. There seems to be a renewed interest in living next to a beautiful wetland; we ourselves, as hunter conservationists, are never happier and healthier than when we are in our beautiful wetland surroundings.

But with any development comes challenges, and polystyrene litter from development estates surrounding Warralily, Armstrong Creek and Sparrow Vale is becoming a blight on the landscape.

We will reach out to local MPs to let them know what’s happening with regard to the litter, and we will be cleaning up someone else’s mess on the Connewarre Wetlands Centre property with the help of our partner organisations.

The Connewarre Wetlands estuary system stretches from the Barwon River; it pretty much begins on the edge of the above-mentioned suburbs and meanders through the various wetlands, eventually passing out to sea at Barwon Heads.

The area is a Ramsar heritage-listed site, and yet developers have been supported in setting up housing estates very close to the swamps or wetlands which are known

to be nurseries for the hundreds of species that call this beautiful place home.

We recognize that it’s progress and it’s not all bad, as each new estate these days seems to come with a readymade wetland in order to deal with water runoff. On the surface, these offer additional habitat for our water birds and are certainly beautifully built and vegetated immediately.

Unfortunately, there’s always two sides to any story. Past experience often demonstrates that no matter how many millions of dollars are spent planning and building these structures, they cannot cope with heavy rainfall events. This is particularly concerning when such developments are built so close to a Ramsar-listed wetland which plays such an important role in providing habitat for many coastal birds – and waterfowl in particular.

The more immediate threat and concern though is the seemingly endless amount of polystyrene pollution escaping the building sites, originating from waffle pods that are used to shape concrete foundations.

There are procedures in place for containment of the polystyrene, and netting/bagging is supplied with the product

in an attempt to control any escape from building sites during windy conditions.

Excess pods should be collected or returned if unused; unfortunately, some operators are non-compliant and the result is that these products are spread for many kilometers surrounding the estates. The material breaks down to smaller portions due to wind and travel, eventually making its way into fields, gutters, channels and streams that lead to the estuarine system. It then breaks down even further on its inevitable journey through the wetland system and out to sea at Barwon Heads.

Most conservation groups would be appalled to see what is occurring – and there is a whole lot more development yet to come.

Locals say several complaints have been filed with the developers, builders, the local council and even EPA. We will also engage with developers, builders and contractors, giving opportunity for change before taking the matter further.

It is hoped that with respectful discussion and concerted effort – both of which we are proud to have a long tradition of – a solution can be reached.

## Taking the fox out of the equation

Field & Game Australia members are active in the management of pest species – and the red fox is among one of the most destructive pest animals we have in this country. This introduced pest is considered a threat to more than 50 Australian native animals and is thought to have played a major role in the decline and eventual extinction of several other native species over the past 130 years.

The red fox is more than just a predator. As omnivores, they have a direct impact on the availability of food for native animals whose diet is much more specialised. Foxes also compete with native animals for suitable sites in which to rear their young. With many of our ground-dwelling native animals having similar requirements, a reduced supply of secure and sheltered nests or burrows contributes to the decline of native species.

The decimation of our native wildlife is not the only concern; the economic impact of foxes in Australia is enormous. The cost has been estimated at about \$227.5 million per annum, which includes: \$17.5 million in sheep production losses, \$190 million in environmental impacts, \$16 million in management costs and \$4 million in research costs.

Landowners and primary producers are understandably keen to see foxes disappear from the Australian landscape – and hunters can provide a service to them. A sole hunter can have an impact and remove a few of these pests, but working as part of a team on a fox drive can deliver better results.

Field & Game members have been participating in this control method for many decades and will continue to do so in an effort to help the native species we so dearly wish to see conserved.



# Hunters contribute to the science

Field & Game Australia encourages its members, where possible, to contribute to citizen science to help inform sustainable management practices.

Citizen science is scientific research conducted, in whole or in part, by amateur scientists.

It adds value to traditional scientific research by allowing a wider and more extensive sampling of data than what might otherwise be achievable without citizen input.

Throughout the 2022 stubble quail season in Victoria, the Victorian Game Management Authority piloted a new research project utilising citizen science, with the aim of studying the age and sex demographics of quail harvested in Victoria.

The GMA sought the help of licensed hunters, who were asked to mail in quail wings from birds harvested during the season. To facilitate this, GMA asked hunters to register for the program, after which they were mailed a collection kit.

The collected quail wings allowed the GMA to determine the sex and age of the harvested stubble quail, with the aim being an improved understanding of the reproductive rates and the demographics of stubble quail in the state.

This data, alongside that of the GMA's stubble quail monitoring program, allows population modelling which in turn informs the development of sustainable management practices.

The data will be made available when the project is complete.



Photo: Bo Curtis



## Quail caller study findings

A hot topic during the 2022 Victorian stubble quail season was the ethics of using electronic acoustic lures (or 'quail callers') for the purpose of hunting quail.

A study undertaken by Deakin University and funded by the Game Management Authority that was published in the peer-reviewed journal *PLOS ONE* sought to examine the efficacy of quail callers across 79 sites which included a range of habitat types in an agricultural setting.

At each site there was a continually broadcasting caller as well as a control station which was not broadcasting.

Quail numbers detected at the active stations were almost 10 times the number detected at the inactive stations, with most quail detections (57%) made within 30m of the active callers.

The study reported: "'Quail callers' are highly effective at attracting stubble quail and concentrating them to a known area, raising questions in relation to sustainable hunting practices, indirect effects, and ethical implications. 'Quail callers' do, however, also offer a tool for estimating quail abundance and developing more accurate population size estimates."

The Game Management Authority subsequently suspended the use of such devices for the duration of the 2022 season, with their future use to be considered more broadly as part of the review of the sunseting Wildlife (Game) Regulations being led by DJPR.

Field & Game Australia recognises that this issue is divisive.

As always, we support the use of robust science when making governance decisions and we continue to support hunters in using responsible and sustainable hunting methods, whilst also recognising that "fair chase" – giving the game a reasonable chance to evade the hunter – is an intrinsic part of an ethical harvest and should be respected.



## Working together for the environment

FGA is proud to be working collaboratively with a number of government and non-government organisations on projects that benefit the natural environment.

One such joint effort is our partnership with Parks Victoria.

Letters of Collaboration register FGA's volunteer projects, our members' skills and qualifications and their hours of attendance for Parks Victoria programs through the ParkConnect system.

Our projects are under way, and we are excited to see what opportunities emerge from them, including WET hen houses, pest/feral animal control, revegetation, tree planting, fencing and more.

FGA also works collaboratively with various catchment management authorities around the state, participating in field trips and education programs around citizen science and topics such as carbon sequestration.

On the manpower front, our members help to bridge the gap in weed management where budgets and staff are short for government departments in multiple states and the Northern Territory, with weed control around wetlands being an ongoing task for a large number of our volunteers.



# MAKING DUCKS

Conservationists use Delta's Hen House blueprint to boost

Ducks seldom migrate on a perfectly straight course.

But if a duck did fly a straight line from Minnedosa, Manitoba, to Melbourne, Victoria, on the southern shores of Australia, the journey would cover 9,786 miles. Minnedosa to Melbourne is literally almost halfway around the world.

While such a flight is only one of fantasy, Delta's Hen House nesting structure concept and design has now traveled that far.

Minnedosa, a rural farm community in southwestern Manitoba where Delta researched, refined and tested the concept beginning about 1990, can rightly be con-

sidered the "home" of the Delta Hen House. These nesting structures are proven to be an effective, cost-efficient tool to boost duck production in North America. Delta Waterfowl maintains nearly 10,000 Hen Houses across the prairies of Canada and the United States, with an additional 4,630 installed and under the care of local chapter volunteers throughout North America.

Now, Hen Houses have made a big leap to Melbourne, Australia. The country's second largest metro area sits on the southern coast of mainland Australia. Nearby, large areas of threatened wetlands serve as vital nesting grounds for many of Australia's native duck

species. That's where volunteer members of Field and Game Australia have installed more than 180 nesting structures based on the Delta Hen House design.

Early results are promising — even spectacular — in the first two nesting seasons of use.

Hen Houses are now boosting the duck flights around the world.



A photograph of two ducks on a body of water. The duck in the foreground is a New Zealand duck, characterized by its dark brown feathers with prominent white scalloped patterns on the wings and back. It has a dark blue bill and a white stripe above its eye. The duck in the background is partially visible, showing similar plumage. The water is calm with some ripples.

# ‘Down Under’

waterfowl populations in Australia BY BILL MILLER

Gary Kramer





Prized Pacific black ducks took readily to Field and Game Australia's experiment with Delta Hen Houses.

## Sharing Delta's Knowledge

In 2016, Dr. Scott Petrie, CEO of Delta Waterfowl, was invited Down Under to meet with the board of directors of Field and Game Australia and speak at the "Conservation Through Sustainable Use of Wildlife Conference." Petrie introduced an eager audience to Delta's pillar programs, including duck production (Hen Houses and Predator Management), habitat conservation, research and education, and Hunter3.

"The trip was among the most impressive of my career," Petrie said. "I think Delta's programs captured the attention of Field and Game Australia because of our two-pronged mission of making ducks and securing the future of waterfowl hunting. The latter is critical to Aussie waterfowlers, because their anti-hunting contingent is outspoken and has the ear of the government. And from the start, FGA seemed especially interested in Delta's Hen House program."

The seeds Petrie sowed in Australia took root, particularly among the executives and 15,000 members of FGA.

## Hen House Pilot Project

Formed in 1958, FGA is Australia's leading volunteer member organization for conservation, hunting and clay target sports. FGA is involved in the preservation of fragile

wetland habitats, predator management, hunter-assisted waterfowl research and hunter advocacy. The Wetlands Environmental Taskforce Trust is administered by FGA to purchase and conserve Australia's remaining wetlands for future generations.

FGA and WET parallel Delta Waterfowl and its programs in many ways.

The wetlands of the state of Victoria, Australia, are located about as far south of the equator as the North American prairie pothole region is above it, which means that the months of the year when breeding and nesting occur are polar opposites. Spring and summer in Australia occur in September through March.

During the 2019-2020 breeding season, FGA volunteers began with a modest test of six Delta-style Hen Houses in the Connewarre wetland system, about 55 miles west of Melbourne. They expanded to 21 structures for the 2020-2021 nesting season.

Because of COVID-19 lockdowns and limited opportunity, those first six structures were installed well into the nesting season, but uptake was stunning. All six structures were discovered by ducks and immediately put to use — a few within hours of installation. Three were used by Pacific black ducks and three by chestnut teal.

Similar success ensued the following season. All of the 21 structures were used by ducks, and some of the Hen Houses



Photos courtesy of FGA volunteers





produced as many as three broods.

“We also now have permits to trap hens in Hen Houses and band them, which opens up great opportunities to learn about hens using the structures,” said Glen Falla, FGA’s conservation and hunting manager.

### Australian Ducks

Eight duck species are native to Australia, including the Australian wood duck, Pacific black duck, grey teal, chestnut teal, hard-head, Australasian shoveler, pink-eared duck and Australian shelduck (a.k.a. mountain duck). All but the shoveler are legal game for Australian duck hunters.

The ducks and habitat in Australia are so different from those in North America that it’s difficult to make direct comparisons.

“We describe our ducks as nomadic, not migratory,” Falla said. “Some move to new habitat as conditions change, but others never leave home because the habitat is constant. Remember, Australia is the driest continent in the world. Our ducks

survive on ephemeral wetlands in a land of droughts and flooding rains. There’s definitely not a consistent migratory pattern based on the seasons like you see in North America.”

Studying range maps of Australian ducks reveals they primarily live close to the southern, eastern and northern coasts of the island continent.

FGA boasts a 60-year history of placing and maintaining traditional wooden nesting boxes similar to wood duck boxes in the United States and Canada. These are primarily used by chestnut teal and grey teal, and occasionally by Pacific black ducks or Australian wood ducks.

Pacific black ducks are especially prized by Australia’s duck hunters. Since they are a close genetic relative of the mallard (which also exists in Australia as an introduced species), the introduction of the Delta Hen House design structures is an effort to help bolster the production of Pacific black ducks. On North America’s prairie

Chestnut teal and other ducks native to Australia are benefitting from Delta-style Hen Houses.

potholes, Hen House nesting structures are adopted nearly exclusively by mallards.

Falla says that the initial installation of WET Hen Houses in the coastal region were used primarily by chestnut teal and grey teal. These species are known to aggressively defend breeding areas, which carries over into possession of Hen Houses. FGA did note, however, an increased uptake by Pacific black ducks over traditional wooden nesting boxes.

Hen Houses installed in more inland regions are showing even more promise. There, Pacific black ducks are dominant. While the same species are contending for the boxes, Pacific black ducks are taking majority ownership of the nesting structures. FGA also noted that pink-eared ducks took up residence in a Hen House for the first time.

“We initially trialed the Hen Houses, because we were looking for something that would attract Pacific black ducks, as they rarely used our traditional timber boxes,” Falla said. “To our surprise, not only did the Pacific black ducks use them almost instantly, but through trail cam observations we learned the chestnut teal would win the battle for the Hen House residence, as they work in pairs to dominate, and mostly the Pacific black duck hen is left to fend for herself. The chestnut teal, despite being significantly smaller, seems to be very aggressive when it comes to fighting for residence and wins almost all battles.”

Overall, however, Hen Houses appear to be fulfilling FGA’s hopes.

“We have witnessed and recorded Pacific black ducks, pink-eared ducks, wood ducks, chestnut teal and grey teal in both traditional boxes and Hen Houses,” Falla said. “The big win though, as hoped, was the increased percentage of uptake by Pacific black ducks.”

### Protection from Predators

On the North American prairie potholes, the primary benefit for a hen mallard laying her eggs in a Delta Hen House is protection of the eggs from nest predators. A mallard using a Hen House is 12 times more likely to successfully hatch a



nest compared to a hen nesting in natural upland grass cover nearby.

FGA is hoping Hen Houses in Australia will produce similar results. The nest predators there include goanna (a large lizard), feral cats, foxes, snakes and crows.

“While avian predators, like crows, can still prey on eggs from Hen Houses, the elevated structures seem to thwart most other types of predators,” Falla said. “The Hen Houses offer much less predation of eggs due to increased difficulty in animals being able to climb and access the nest.”

Since Hen Houses place nesting sites directly over the water, they also shorten the perilous trip a newly hatched duckling faces when hatched in an upland nest. Hen Houses also afford protection for nesting hens. A study conducted in the early 2000s showed that ducks using a Hen House are 20 percent more likely to survive during the spring nesting season.

### Volunteers Drive Success

While Falla coordinates the budding FGA/WET Hen House project, he is quick to give credit to FGA volunteers who manage the program and maintain and monitor the structures.

“The WET Hen House project has largely been achieved through the Geelong Branch of Field and Game Australia, through Trent Leen and his team of hands-on volunteers,” Falla said. “We are now registered with Parks Victoria — our governing body that has authority over many of the public wetlands — as a volunteer organization, and I will be managing the coordination of projects through our 55 branches within Victoria, and eventually 67 Australia-wide.

“The volunteers that are so valuable to the success are the real heroes, I am just trying to pull it all together and take care of the policy and red tape. I’m blessed to be in a great situation to have to hold people back because they just want to get out there and do stuff.”

### Embraced by the Community

While duck production is the direct goal of Hen Houses in Australia — just as it is for Delta in North America — the program is generating goodwill in the general community as well.



Regardless of the hemisphere, Delta Hen Houses protect nests from predators.

In a recent article for *Field & Game* magazine, Falla wrote, “Rubbing shoulders with community members as key stakeholders in projects is a great way to tell the real story behind our commitment to conservation and amplify our reputation of being ‘doers’ rather than simply making noise. Ultimately we want to be recognized as leaders in this field.”

FGA’s experience in Hen Houses being welcomed by private landowners is also similar to Delta’s among farmers and ranchers on the U.S. and Canadian prairies.

“The interest and uptake on private land by farmers who recognize agricultural practices aren’t always in the interest of duck habitat has been overwhelming,” Falla wrote. “The preparedness to allow access and put something back into nature is reassuring, and it’s now becoming readily recognized from the roadways. We are often sent messages by people who have spotted WET Hen Houses from the bitumen road and ask, ‘Is that one of yours?’”

### More Ducks for Everyone

As this edition of *Delta Waterfowl* magazine goes to print, the 2021-2022 nesting season for ducks in Australia is wrapping up. FGA volunteers installed 180 Hen House structures in preparation, and at least 60 percent are being used.

Trail cameras are monitoring many of the structures and revealing exciting new data.

“Many of our Hen Houses have had multiple nestings within the same season by new pairs of birds,” Falla said. “We have had some installed in areas of no water that finally got rain, and within a week we are seeing nest bowls and new eggs with more being added each day. Our breeding season is still going on and with the recent rains, we may very well see usage and nest success go even higher.”

Petrie offers congratulations to FGA on its success, and he is proud that Delta Waterfowl could offer the Hen House building blocks to help create a successful duck program in Australia.

“The results Field and Game Australia has achieved in just two nesting seasons are remarkable,” he said. “And the fact the effort is entirely driven and operated by volunteers is astounding. We see Hen Houses in the PPR being used by mallards two or maybe three times in a season on rare occasions, but to see multiple species lined up in the Australian wetlands using the structures throughout the nesting season is amazing. We look forward to sharing information with FGA that will put more ducks into the fall flights for all of us.” ▲

*Bill Miller is a staff writer for Delta Waterfowl.*



# Hunting for conservation ideas

**As part of its longstanding and ongoing commitment to the environment and the birds, animals and plants that depend upon it, Wetlands Environmental Taskforce has engaged in multiple meetings and site visits with various government departments, non-government organisations and interested pastoralists to discuss what we can offer in regard to habitat that is suitable or meets the requirements for possible release sites for the critically endangered plains-wanderer – a ground-dwelling bird which looks somewhat similar to a quail but with longer legs and a finer bill.**

One of the benefits of having such a large membership base is the ability to use the database to seek out professions that may be of use in our conservation efforts – and we have a large membership base in rural areas with an agricultural background. Further, a number of our hunter/conservationists are pastoralists.

In these days of large property holdings, areas that are not cultivated or managed by herbicides are becoming more and more rare; but our networking has brought some great minds together and we are investigating the value of various habitats in the region surrounding the Wetlands Environmental Taskforce property at Lake Buloke in western Victoria. Regional landowners with small plots of natural habitat have been contacted; some of them are involved in other conservation projects, while others are simply interested in offering their native grass corridors for a good cause.

Our network of hunters knows the history behind species that may inhabit certain areas. When you reach out to passionate locals, they might recall stories of sightings of such birds as the plains-wanderer during a quail hunt, and both the distant memories and more recent encounters are discussed.

It is with great anticipation, then, that we investigate the ability to place sound monitors and game cameras in the field in an effort to find pockets of plains-wanderers. Thermal imagery is another great way to identify these cryptic birds in the field, and all the methods that may aid in identifying them will be considered.

Confidence from locals is high that colonies

certainly remain, as sightings still take place without the modern methods of locating these birds. It's amazing what endless hours in the field with a good gun dog has managed to reveal over the years. We often lament the days where spotting a plains-wanderer was not that uncommon during a great day chasing a feed of stubble quail.

There is much debate about what has led to the plain-wanderer's reduction in numbers. A casual conversation with any non-hunting party often leads to comments around hunters illegally hunting them either on purpose or by mistake. To a hunter who has witnessed numerous sightings in his blessed life in the field, this is like a red rag to a bull; who could possibly mistake the two? Happily, we can honestly say we have never witnessed such an action. Hunters and dogs alike should be able to quickly identify the difference, and likely the dog will behave differently, as they do with a groundlark.

There are examples of other countries in which populations of native grasslands wildlife (or ground birds) have been decimated through hunting pressure. Thankfully, managed hunting and ethical

hunting practices in Australia have prevented this occurring in our back yard, and hunter compliance is of a high standard.

The more concerning factor in this country is our diminishing native grassland areas – and this is where we can have a positive impact which will assist in boosting wildlife numbers and ensure the sustainability of many species, with the plains-wanderer among them.

Assisting in identifying current habitat, the regeneration or expansion of suitable habitat through our network of interested members with suitable property, and continuing to encourage reporting of confirmed sightings of the plains-wanderer will help our aims to ensure its protection.

We know there will be an element of suspicion and doubt around our motives, and possibly concern from some that any sightings will immediately be used against us to prevent quail hunting in a certain area. However, we encourage people to engage with us directly, report confirmed sightings, use that camera phone in their pocket to record sightings, and help us to be leaders in the conservation arena.





# FIELD & GAME AUSTRALIA

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