

HUNTING NEWS



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Happy hunters after a successful Opening Morning last season (Photo: John Meikle)

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SEASON PROSPECTS – SOLID DUCK NUMBERS

After a wetter than usual August and September, wetlands were well topped up with water heading into summer which made for a bumper waterfowl breeding season. This resulted in strong broods of mallard duck and paradise shelduck, alongside stable populations of black swan.

However, as we progressed through summer, prolonged drought conditions eventuated across much of the lower North Island with Taranaki and the Waimarino experiencing an unusually warm and dry season. It's been slightly drier than normal for Manawatu too but there's been just enough sporadic rain to keep ponds topped up; and although Lake Wairarapa was very low for extended periods, frequent southerlies late in summer resulted in farm dams along the Taranaki foothills and eastern hill country remain at relatively good levels for holding ducks.

Thanks to the solid spring breeding season, good numbers of ducks remain throughout both the Wellington and Taranaki Fish & Game regions. However, the birds' distribution patterns have altered owing to the prevailing drought conditions – they are less widely dispersed, instead congregating in numbers on rivers, streams, lakes and ponds that have retained permanent water.

This could bode well for hunters in the right places, with the potential for an action-packed Opening Day if dry conditions continue and ducks remain concentrated in the areas they've been hanging out over summer. That said, hunters would do well to keep an eye on the water level at the spot they intend to shoot, be flexible and make alternative plans if their shooting spot is not holding enough water and the ducks are elsewhere come Opening Day.

The birds are certainly around – it's just a matter of locating them and scouting around to find the best hunting locations during the season ahead.

There will also be opportunities to target them in different locations when they disperse as the season progresses. This includes targeting mallards and parries over crop paddocks. For example, focusing on re-grassed maize paddocks as the wetter weather arrives, or targeting recently grazed paddocks behind cows being fed supplementary feed, such as maize silage.

This is where working with local farmers can prove to be beneficial. The farmer benefits from you dispersing birds, and you get a chance to harvest a feed for the family. Often landowners possess key information on game bird habits, such as their morning and evening flight patterns and feeding areas, which is critical information for setting decoy spreads in the most effective locations.

In terms of your setup, there is no need to be overly extravagant – a half-dozen or so full-bodied decoys and some camouflage netting draped for cover can work very well (just make sure to get your calls out and practice before the season begins, rather than winging it on the day).

The team at Wellington and Taranaki Fish & Game hope everyone has a safe and successful game bird season, and we encourage you to connect with others to explore new avenues for hunting locations to stay amongst the action and get the most out of your investment in a licence.

REGS AT A GLANCE

Season Start: Saturday, May 3, 2025.

Season Closing (main waterfowl): Sunday, June 29, 2025.

Wellington Fish & Game Region

- Grey/mallard duck 10 birds per hunter per day.
- Paradise shelduck 10 per hunter per day for both Areas A (East) and Areas B (West).
- Black swan 5 birds per hunter per day for the duration of the waterfowl season.

Taranaki Fish & Game Region

- Grey/mallard duck 10 birds per hunter per day.
- Paradise shelduck 10 birds per hunter per day, with 15 birds per hunter per day on the May 3 and 4 (Opening Weekend) in area C only.
- Black swan 2 birds per hunter per day.
- Pukeko 5 birds in Areas A and B and 10 birds per hunter per day in Area C with a season extension through to Sunday, August 31, 2025.

Scan the QR code to check all the regulations before the start of the season.



GRAB YOUR LICENCE THE EASY WAY



The fastest, easiest way to get you game bird hunting licence for this season is to jump online.

All you need is your credit card and in just two minutes you'll be set to go. And there's no need to worry about your licence turning up in time for Opening Weekend – the receipt we email you will suffice as proof of purchase until it arrives in your letterbox.

Head to www.fishandgame.org.nz and click the 'Licence' tab at the top of the page, or simply scan the QR code.





SCOUT AROUND THIS SEASON

There's an old saying, "The definition of insanity is doing the same thing over and over again and expecting different results." Consider that those who adapt their hunting behaviour have the greatest success...

One of the biggest mistakes staff and rangers see each season is hunters going to same spot over and over and hoping the ducks keep showing up. This doesn't normally pan out well unless there are a lot of ducks in your area all the time; more likely, the ducks will simply stop going to an overshot pond.

Being mobile and scouting are the top two most important things that you need to do to be successful.

TIPS AND TRICKS

Scouting should be a year-round activity. You don't need to literally spend the weekends on special trips looking for ducks, but when you are out and about keep your eyes peeled for likely waterfowl habitat and hiding holes. When the hunting season rolls around, you can narrow down the area you go by looking for

ducks in places you have seen them in the past.

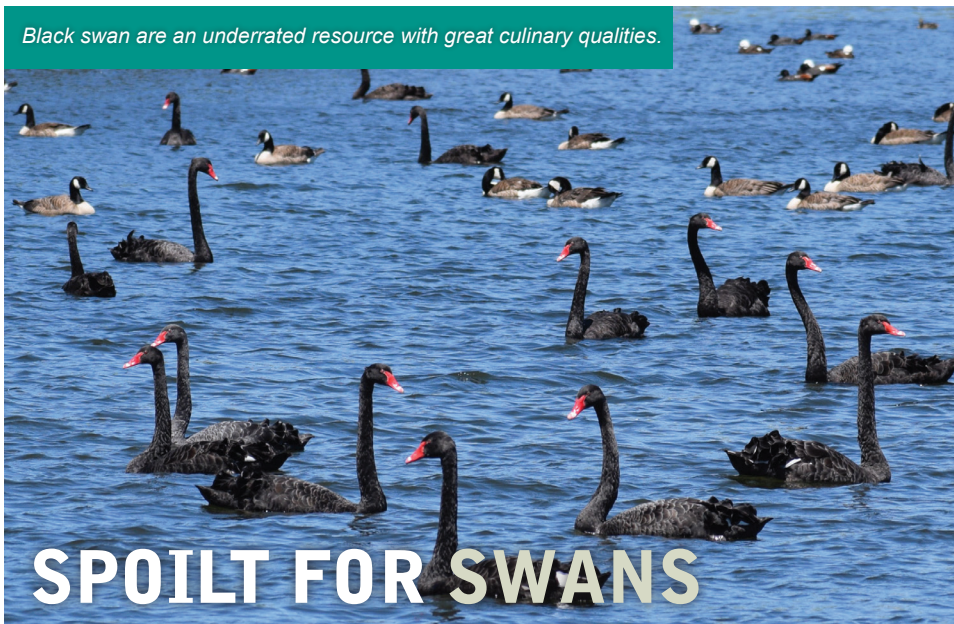
If you can't be mobile and set up hunts where the ducks are, then you are going to be severely disadvantaged. However, all is not lost. You can still make your area more attractive to waterfowl. The best long-term solution is to promote attractive habitat.

While ranging, many of the ponds we visit have little to no emergent or peripheral vegetation, or, may be too small and rely on feeding to get duck use.

Vegetation provides important cover for ducks, with the best wetlands being a 50:50 ratio of emergent vegetation to open water. To make your wetland habitat more attractive, plantings around the periphery and shallows of your wetland are a step towards holding ducks. This includes in the off-season, with emergent cover important for promoting duckling survival which will help with duck numbers come hunting season.

So, this season, don't be afraid to mix up your hunting, whether it's trying somewhere new or just spending more time trying to find where the ducks are in the landscape.

Black swan are an underrated resource with great culinary qualities.



SPOILT FOR SWANS

Black swans provide a sustainable hunting and harvest opportunity. Long-term population monitoring indicates that black swans have been increasing in numbers over the last 14 years, providing a significant food resource for game bird hunters.

A mature swan provides around 1.5kg of meat, with one leg weighing around 350g, and one breast weighing around 440g.

There are plenty of ways to utilise swan meat. For example, slow cook the legs with red wine, tinned tomatoes and bay leaves, and for breast meat, slice thin and crumb for schnitzel or mince it up for burger patties. Beyond the prime cuts, the frame presents culinary potential in the form of broths, stocks and soups.

For those seeking hunting prospects, there are good numbers to be found on lakes in the coastal Whanganui to Waverley area, and also in north Taranaki. In the Wellington region, there is a large swan population on Lake Wairarapa, and at times these move onto surrounding pastures on private land. Large congregations can cause a nuisance to farming operations so farmers will generally be happy if hunters help by harvesting a few. Door-knocking some of the landowners in the area may open up some shooting opportunities. Put swan on the menu this season!

LAKE WAIRARAPA HUNTING ACCESS UPDATE

Wellington Fish & Game has been liaising with the Wairarapa Moana Statutory Reserve Board and waterfowl hunting has been approved for the 2025 season.

The Department of Conservation has stipulated that no new structures (mimai) are to be built and no existing structures are to be extended. All hunters accessing the reserves must have a valid access permit book available by contacting the Wellington Fish & Game office.

We strongly encourage all hunters to treat the lake and surrounding wetland areas with utmost respect – access is a privilege and not a right.



Part of the newly created coastal wetland for pied stilt and waterfowl.



WETLAND SUCCESS IN COASTAL TARANAKI

A recent wetland project that has made it past the tightened regulations of the National Environmental Standards for Freshwater is located on a coastal South Taranaki farm, where two wetlands have been created through a collaboration between the landowner, the NZ Game Bird Habitat Trust, and Taranaki Fish & Game's Hunting and Habitat Scheme.

This project has succeeded in turning an area of little ecological value into two wetlands which will, over time, support diverse flora and fauna.

These wetlands were specifically designed with species diversity in mind, with areas of permanent and ephemeral shallow water and low margins for coastal wading birds and ducks.

Once planting is complete, sections of larger, dense native trees and shrubs alongside more open areas with low stature planting will be tailored specifically towards the favoured habitat of the pied stilt. Ongoing pest plant and animal control measures surround these wetlands to keep unwanted predators at bay.

Although the wetland is still in its infancy, paradise shelduck and mallard duck are already raising broods in the area, alongside three occupied pied stilt nests. It is envisaged that the refuge will act as a reservoir for waterfowl to disperse more widely and enhance opportunities for hunters.

If you have a wetland project in the Wellington or Taranaki Fish & Game regions that you'd like support or assistance with, see page 8 for details on how we can help.

More hunters means more voices to advocate for the pursuit (Photo: Jacob Morrison)



HELP SAFEGUARD OUR HUNTING HERITAGE

With certain stereotypes perpetuated about hunters, this Opening Weekend it is worth keeping in mind that hunting requires a 'social licence' from the general public to continue.

You can help safeguard the proud hunting heritage we have in this country by adhering to the following.

- Hunt ethically: Take only what you can use, minimise wounding, retrieve all birds in the field, and leave any drinking until after the hunting is done and the guns are safely locked away.
- Ensure you are adhering to the seven basic firearms rules and being a good role model for other hunters.
- Choosing appropriate shot for your hunting situation and brush up on your shooting skills. Attend a pre-season target shoot to 'get your eye in' to improve harvest success.
- If you are cleaning birds in the field, ensure you bury any remains and utilise as much of the bird as possible.
- Introduce someone new to hunting: More hunters equates to a stronger voice for hunting and more resources to maintain habitat, improve access and advocate for the pursuit. Take some time to mentor someone new into duck hunting this season – it could be one of the most rewarding experiences you have, especially when they get their first bird.



Proper planning for the season pays dividends (Photo: John Meikle)



• **Enhancing your pond** – Ducks just love some waterbodies and will avoid others. Here some key things to consider from our expert staff.

• **Semi-auto shotgun maintenance** – Cleaning is something a lot of shotgunners don't even think about until their semi-auto starts malfunctioning. Don't get caught out on Opening Morning..



• **Keeping kids in the hunt** – How to keep your kids entertained in the maimai until the action starts.

• **Getting the most out of your gun dog** – A five-part series by gun dog guru John Stevens.



KEY TO SUCCESSFUL CONCEALMENT



Try to get a duck's eye view of you maimai to see where improvements are needed (Photo: Hamish Carnachan)

A beautiful day of clear sky and no wind last summer saw staff from Wellington Fish & Game board a Cessna and take to the air for our annual paradise shelduck counts.

Eying a well-maintained pond that looked set up for hunting, we flew a lazy circle and descended for a closer look and were staggered to see a bright red maimai!

While this is an extreme example of what staff see in their travels, we're regularly surprised at how hunters are missing some of the basic pre-season prep and the impact this will likely be having on their hunting.

Camouflage is absolute key and should be done with an eye for detail. Flying low level around wetlands and ponds all over the lower North Island for work, it affords us a duck's eye view of hunting stands.

KEY TIPS FOR BETTER CONCEALMENT:

- Ensure there are no straight lines visible from any angle – there are no straight lines in nature so if a wild animal sees one it will instantly raise suspicion.
- Where possible, use natural vegetation (sourced from nearby) rather than artificial camouflage nets. It is surprising how easy it is to see the difference from the air.
- Scrub your maimai well before the season starts so as not to scare resident birds, but not so early that the vegetation will die off and lose all its natural colour.
- Cover hands and faces, and wear camo clothing so birds can't see you through any gaps in your blind.
- It's amazing how many people scrub the sides of their maimais with just a token covering thrown on the roof. If you've got access to a drone, fly it over your hunting possie to view it as a duck would.

Fish & Game invests in advocating for hunters so present and future generations can continue to enjoy the pursuit (Photo: Hamish Carnachan)



OUR ADVOCACY FOR HUNTERS

Although passionate game bird hunters may find it hard to fathom, the pursuit in New Zealand is not a given each year.

Annually, Fish & Game must make the case to Parliament to hunt game birds. We must show that we are sustainably managing populations whilst minimising their impact on activities such as farming and aviation.

It is a balance, with science and monitoring required to understand population dynamics and therefore set limits on seasons, methods and harvest to ensure populations are kept within balance.

On top of this, there are increasing barriers to hunting such as access restrictions to hunting areas through regulations and anti-hunting advocacy endorsed by changing societal attitudes.

Throughout the year Fish & Game utilises part of the licence fees to advocate for hunting in our regions. We also provide hunter feedback into other statutory processes such as Firearms Legislation reform, council planning processes and development plans affecting wetland habitat.

Fish & Game will continue to advocate on hunter's behalf so that the region's wetlands and waterways are maintained, and that hunting may continue, despite the headwinds we face.

As a hunter, you can be proud of your contribution to the nation's wetlands, waterways and access to them for recreation through your licence fee. Hunters contribute more than the average New Zealander to conserving the nation's wetlands and access to them for recreation.



SAFETY IN THE MAIMAI

A quick and simple wall-mount vertical shotgun holder is a must in any maimai, especially if you've got excited kids and dogs in tight confines with you.

This 'Toolflex' storage system 20-30mm size is just the thing!

Plastic framed, screws provided and flexible rubber as the storage grab, this not only holds your barrel but doesn't damage the bluing. At less than \$20 a pair from Bunnings, this is a cheap investment for peace of mind.

This is a proven safety feature you need in your maimai; go grab some for this season. Be smart – and safe!

FIND THE FOOD, FIND THE DUCKS



Maize paddocks can be the gift that keeps on giving with all the residual feed left after harvest (Photo: Rhys Barrier)

Last season demonstrated the value of factoring feed into your hunting plans – those who actively fed out their hunting spots from the start of April, even within public hunting areas others find difficult to access, generally did really well on Opening Weekend and throughout the rest of the season.

Hunters fortunate enough to have had access to private land where maize stubble existed, or where grain had been fed out as supplementary food to get stock through the dry summer and autumn, also found this 'the gift that kept on giving'.

While some mallards may migrate to other parts in search of food, in Wairarapa and Manawatu there are pockets of extensive grain cropping. Even though these tend to be harvested ahead of Opening, and earlier than southern regions, the cut-over or newly sown pasture provides a good food reservoir which will hold waterfowl nearby for some time.

Safe havens near these areas like small ponds, streams, drains and even larger rivers where birds are not hunted/disturbed, are good spots to target

if you're prepared to politely door knock for access through the season.

If you want to feed your own spot, you don't need to commit to a huge outlay. Depending on flight lines in the area, a few bags of maize over a week or two can still bring in pairs of ducks which will quickly alert other passing birds and you can go from several mallards to 60 quite quickly and have an excellent hunt on your hands. (Leave the spot as undisturbed as possible though, as the wily mallard won't tolerate too much human activity, particularly after Opening).

This season give a thought as to whether you have access to a pond or waterway that lends itself to feeding, or finding areas around the hinterland where there is abundant food for ducks to come into.

W A I R A R A P A



Hunting & Fishing®

NEW ZEALAND

PHOTO COMPETITION

Win a \$300 H&F Voucher

Send in your favourite photos from this game bird hunting season and you could be in to win a \$300 voucher to spend in store at Wairarapa Hunting & Fishing.

We won't blow your secret spot, just include the name of the hunter(s), photographer's details, and general location in the Wellington or Taranaki Fish & Game region.

You can send us as many hunting photos as you like. Details on how to enter can be found in our Game Bird Hunting Bulletin e-newsletter (see facing article).

GET THE LATEST HUNTING INTEL



Boost your success this season with the best duck hunting info (Photo: Hamish Carnachan)

Getting the best intelligence and information to plan your hunting trips can certainly improve your success over the season.

That's why Wellington and Taranaki Fish & Game produces the Game Bird Hunting Bulletin in the lead-up to the season and over the course of the main waterfowl hunting period.

Each Thursday we'll email you the latest weather outlook, tips, recipes and news from around the region to help you plan your weekend hunting excursions. If you'd like to receive a copy, please email us at to sign up: wellington@fishandgame.org.nz



Upland game hunting provides excitement and reward through the winter months (Photo: Dave Little)



HOW TO PLAN AN UPLAND GAME HUNT

There are a number of forestry blocks in the Manawatu and Wairarapa that Fish & Game has negotiated access to for upland game hunting. In addition to these spots, the team also releases pheasant at select spots on public land around the lower North Island to help supplement wild populations.

Recently harvested forestry blocks provide ideal upland bird habitat and hunting, and are the perfect environment for working with gun dogs – no electric fences, no stock as a distraction and kilometres of roads, tracks and edge cover to explore.

Many of the larger rivers in the lower North Island also hold reasonable populations of quail. It might take a bit of scouting but if you're looking in the right places eventually you'll catch up with them.

Upland game hunting is fantastic for well-being in that it provides physical activity, excitement and reward through the winter months, particularly after the main waterfowl season has ended.

The density of upland game and ease of hunting can vary between forests but there are some simple ways to put the odds of encountering birds more in your favour.

WHAT TO LOOK FOR:

- The best habitat is in cut over (recently harvested) through to four-year-old trees. Focus your attention on these areas.
- Inkweed – it is everywhere in recently harvested forestry. You need to find the thickets with ripe purple berries as these are what the birds will be eating.
- Pheasants like to roost in the security of bigger trees and are never too far from cover. This could be a block of bigger pine trees, or a totara stand in the adjacent farmland. Find good inkweed in vicinity of this type of cover and you will find birds.

HOW TO APPROACH AND HUNT:

- Plan a hunt that will take advantage of the wind direction. Your gun dog will have much better chances of detecting birds if they can get wind coming from likely cover.
- Be stealthy. Use terrain or tall trees as cover to approach areas that you know hold birds. Pheasants will often flush early at the sight of a hunter, so getting into range without being seen is important.
- When moving you should always be thinking about where to position yourself to be able to take a shot. Select paths that give you the best views of where birds might flush from.
- Be ready. A pheasant flushing downward off a ridge top will be out of range in less than three seconds. Quail are also quick off the mark and will reach dense cover in a flash.
- Learn from every hunt. Understand where birds were located morning and afternoon, what sort of cover they were in, where they flushed to etc. Target similar areas next time you are out at those times.

Give upland hunting a try this season. It can be very rewarding and your dog will love you for it. Permits to the forestry blocks are available by contacting the Wellington Fish & Game office (wellington@fishandgame.org.nz).



MAKE THE MOST OF YOUR MEAT!



Pukeko burger by Game Chef Angelo Georgalli

There are thousands of recipes for game birds, be it in crockpots, conventional ovens, microwaves or even barbecues.

You should be able to find good game cookbooks without too much trouble in larger sports shops and most book stores. The Internet is also a brilliant source of game recipes.



You will also find some excellent ways to prepare and cook your birds by some of the country's top game chefs on our website – scan the QR code to get some culinary inspiration for this season.

LET'S BAND TOGETHER



Duck bands contain important info to help us manage the mallard population

Want to do your part to help us manage and improve the mallard population? Then get the details of any banded birds you've harvested back to us.

Those little steel rings hanging around your caller lanyard contain really important information for us to help ensure sustainable populations of mallards are around well into the future.

We know hunters like to keep bands as a memento or 'trophy' – that's fine, we just want to get some basic info off you such as where and when you shot the bird carrying that precious metal. Call us on (06)359 0409.



A lot of work goes into duck banding - please help by getting banded bird details back to us

WE'RE WORKING HARD FOR OUR HUNTERS



Here's a short summary of the work we're doing on behalf of Wellington and Taranaki Fish & Game hunting licence holders:

SPECIES MONITORING – Counting the birds

Each year we carry out intensive aerial and ground monitoring of mallard, paradise shelduck, black swan, shoveler and pukeko populations. This was the ninth year we've banded mallards – around 2700 ducks banded for the year. This info helps set regulations to ensure viable populations of game birds for you into the future.

RESOURCE MANAGEMENT – Protecting wetlands and waterways

Hearings into regional councils' plans have required our engagement – we've been there advocating strongly for waterfowl and their habitat to protect the lower North Island's wetlands. Wellington-Taranaki Fish & Game also ensures the work we do on our own wetlands in the region is done in accordance with the RMA. We've been active in processes to support making it easier for landowners to do enhancement wetlands without red tape.

WETLAND DEVELOPMENT – Creating habitat

We continue to oversee a number of projects funded by the Game Bird Habitat Trust (GBHT), and Wellington-Taranaki Fish & Game staff enjoy helping landowners undertaking their own pond development projects by providing advice and expertise. If you need help with a wetland project, please give us a call (06)359-0409.

ACCESS – Maintaining hunter access

Ensuring ongoing access to the waterfowl hunting resource is an increasingly demanding area in which we work for hunters. We're working with relevant authorities to ensure there is a maintenance of perpetual

and uninterrupted access for licence holders and the general public to all traditional fishing and game bird hunting locations.

INFORMATION TO LICENCEHOLDERS – Keeping you informed

We want to ensure you get the best bang for your buck out of the investment you've made in a licence. This newsletter and our weekly hunting reports – the Game Bird Hunting Bulletin – are intended to provide information, updates, hunting tips, and happenings from around the region to help make your season a real success. On top of that, staff have developed a host of resources to help landowners and hunters trap predators, enhance their farm dams, plans for building maimais and much more. If you'd like any of this information, please give us a buzz (06)359-0409.

ADVOCACY – Working in and with other agencies

Fish & Game continues to work with DOC, regional councils, and community groups to ensure hunters' interests are protected. We're also heavily involved in defending hunters' social licence to shoot game birds by legitimising the pursuits in the wider public arena. We are actively engaged with iwi to ensure that hunter access to lakes – such as Wairarapa Moana – and wetlands continues following the Treaty settlement.

COMPLIANCE – Keeping everyone honest

Our team of warranted rangers are active throughout the Wellington and Taranaki Fish & Game regions – checking licences, bag limits and compliance with the regulations on both public and private land. Most hunters expect to see us Opening Weekend but we're ranging throughout the season.

GAME BIRD HABITAT GRANTS

When hunters and stamp collectors buy a Game Bird Habitat Stamp, the proceeds go towards the protection and enhancement of waterfowl habitat.

The stamp attracts a fee to hunters of \$5 which is paid as part of every game licence sold. The proceeds from both licence sales and sales to stamp collectors go to the GBHT to be dispensed as grants. This process has worked well over 30 years, enabling the Trust to contribute a total of \$2.5 million towards some 300 projects.

Last year we helped with two successful applications in the Wellington region – a \$5000 grant for Hamish Buchanan's wetland in Otope, and another \$5000 for Josh Murray's wetland in Studliegh. Staff also assisted neighbouring regions with successful funding applications.

If you have a commitment to conserve, own, or help manage land that is capable of supporting game birds, the GBHT would like to help. Talk first to your local Fish & Game office and apply for a grant. Applications are assessed once a year with a closing date of June 30.

