

HUNTING NEWS



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Ollie Mitchell super excited to be amongst the action (Opening morning last season. Photo: Derek Mitchell).



There's plenty to be excited about on the eve of Opening this season. Photo: Hamish Carnachan

SOLID SEASON ON THE CARDS

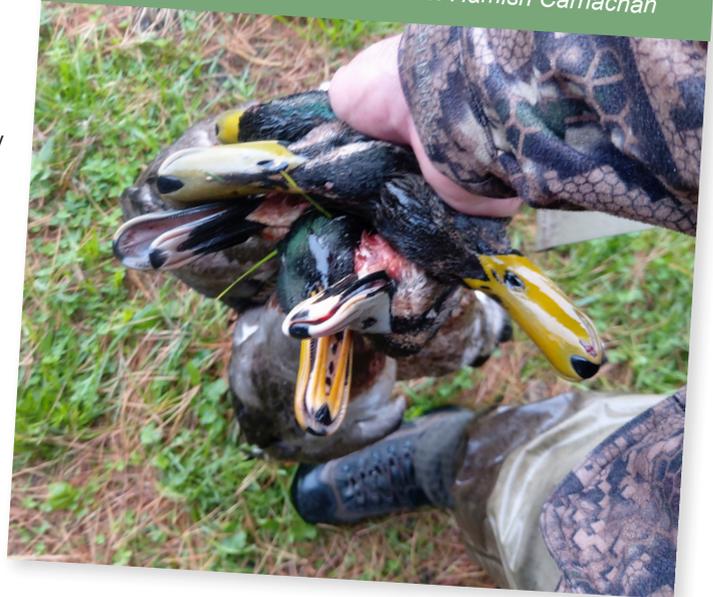
Both the Wellington and Taranaki Fish & Game regions have observed very similar weather patterns that will have influenced waterfowl numbers. A mild spring with a moderate amount of rainfall saw most wetlands and ponds holding enough water for successful breeding, and a lack of floods during this important period means brood survival should have been good. Many landowners have again observed hens taking multiple broods through to fledging too which is very encouraging. Given the good mallard populations in both regions, we're coming off a solid base so the expectation is that there should be more birds about.

Hunters keeping an eye on the sky might not have noticed this anecdotally, though, which is likely because the long dry summer has seen ducks congregating on ponds that are still holding water along with the large water bodies like Lake Wairarapa, Horowhenua and the chain of coastal sand dune lakes from Hawera to south of Whanganui. Some significant duck camps have also been sighted on river bends and in estuarine areas where there are exposed beaches for birds to rest and preen.

And although the sodden summer which preceded last season provided ample food for ducks from flooded pastures, this summer has seen excellent yields for cropping farmers and plenty of birds dialed into this feeding opportunity post-harvest. Late harvested crops after around Opening will therefore be hotspots for both mallards and parries to converge on and mop up maize, and if we get some rainfall and ponding on these freshly harvested fields plenty of ducks will be drawn in.

While the waterfowl populations are strong across both regions, of course the weather is an important factor for hunting. Last season we experienced very few of the big southerly and westerly fronts that really move birds around during the season. Hopefully with the El Nino weather pattern we'll see more of these in the months ahead. We can't forecast what the weather is going to do this coming season, but we can reliably say that good numbers of mallards are around and, hopefully (given the right conditions), this should translate to good opportunities to harvest some free-range food for the table and enjoy time out in the wild with friends and family. While wishing you a safe and successful Opening Weekend, we really encourage hunters to hunt throughout the season to maximise their investment in a game bird licence, and also move around to locate birds that have holed after the first weekend of hunting.

Hunters can expect good opportunities with solid mallard populations in both regions. Photo: Hamish Carnachan



GAME SEASON 2024 AT A GLANCE

- Season Start: Saturday, May 4, 2024
- Season Closing (main waterfowl): Sunday, Jun 30, 2024

Bag Limits:

Wellington Fish & Game region

- Grey/mallard ducks remains the same at 12 birds per hunter per day.
- Paradise Shelduck reduces from 12 to 10 per hunter per day for both Area A (East) and Area B (West).
- Black Swan limit increases to five birds per hunter per day for the duration of the waterfowl season.

Bag Limits:

Taranaki Fish & Game region

- Grey/mallard ducks 12 birds per hunter per day.
- Paradise Shelduck 10 birds per hunter per day.
- Shoveler Duck 2 birds per hunter per day.
- 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 25, 2024.

Please consult your regulations booklet 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.





TOP TIPS FOR SUCCESS THIS SEASON

Pre-season prep will help make you hunt more enjoyable and more successful. Photo: Hamish Carnachan

Only a few weeks out from the start of the season, your pond and maimai prep work should be complete as you don't really want to disturb the area you plan to shoot too close to Opening. There are, however, other areas that you can and should still be looking at for your pre-season prep.

Some shotgun maintenance, patterning your gun for new ammunition loads you might be using, and getting in some practice on clay targets, all help you get set and in the best possible position for the big day whether you're an experienced hunter or novice. For new hunters, aspects such as how to set decoy spreads, correct calling techniques, and how to track and lead ducks for the shot are all important to learn and get right if you want to be successful.

The team at Fish & Game are determined to help hunters of all skill levels have a successful season. With that in mind we've created a host of multi-media resources in the hope you maximise your investment in a game bird hunting licence. Scan the codes below to check out some short videos on selected hunting topics.



Tips for Shooting Success

Everything from 'fitting' your shotgun, patterning your gun correctly, tracking and leading birds.

Setting Decoys

This video has some great tips on what a realistic decoy spread should look like to attract birds, rather than make them wary.



Tips for Duck Calling

Hunter Morrow, one of the best in the game, shares tips for calling in the field.

Semi-Auto Shotgun Maintenance

Here's a great article from Greg Duly on how you can avoid your semi-auto malfunctioning on Opening Day.



FULL PHASE OUT OF LEAD SHOT

The 2024 season will see the end to the exemption of lead being able to be used within 200m of all water, private and public, for .410 shotguns. This completes a full phase out of toxic shot over waterways, a move that was initiated by the government back in 2004.

The .410 exemption was given because there were no non-toxic substitute shot loads. With alternatives .410 shot now available, this exemption has been removed. Hunters who use .410s are advised to purchase their ammunition early in case stock runs out – call your local outdoor supplies retailer for details on availability.

DON'T RISK YOUR FIREARMS LICENCE

We'd like to think that all enthusiastic duck hunters recognise the value of Fish & Game's management of the duck hunting resource, the advocacy we do on your behalf to keep hunting areas open, and the pursuit recognised as a legitimate pastime, and that accordingly you purchase a licence to support us. However, there are always a few who prefer to chance their arm, cheat the rest, and go without buying a licence. While these freeloaders probably think it is just a bit of mischief, Fish & Game is trying to get the message out about the significance of getting caught without a duck hunting licence.

We have been advised that if you are prosecuted for an offence under the Wildlife Act – such as hunting without a game bird licence – you are likely to fail the 'Fit and Proper Person' requirement when it comes to having your firearms licence renewed. So, if you have a mate that you suspect hunts without a licence, perhaps give them a bit of a prod to not risk their future access to all firearms. Fish & Game has strong and active compliance teams operating throughout the Wellington and Taranaki Fish & Game regions, often our Rangers are accompanied by police officers, so expect to see us whether you hunt private or public water.



This hunter was fully compliant - make sure you and your mates are this season too. Photo: Hamish Carnachan

TRANSPORT REQUIREMENTS

New Arms Act regulations mean duck hunters need to be aware of how to safely secure their shotguns and ammunition when travelling to and from your hunting possie.

For example, firearms must be concealed from view in the vehicle, made inoperable and ammo still needs to be stored in a locked storage area. Scan the code to check all the new requirements.



Photo: Hamish Carnachan

A few simple steps can keep ducks on your pond longer and coming back. Photo: Richie Cosgrove.

HOLDING DUCKS ON YOUR POND

There are plenty of hunters out there who spend thousands, if not tens of thousands of dollars on feed to ensure they've got ducks on their pond come Opening Day. Don't despair, you don't need to pour money into a (water-filled) hole in the ground to keep birds holding on your pond for longer, and keep them coming back throughout the season. Here are some simple steps:

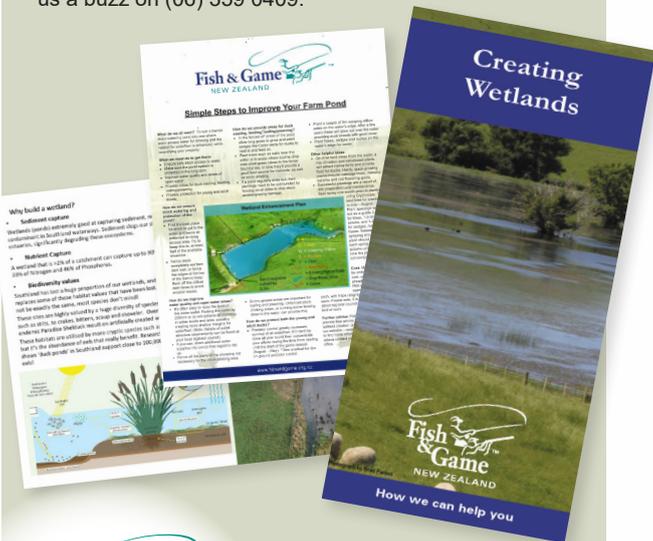
- 1. Get Your Prep Done Early** - Ideally all your prep work should be well completed a month before Opening so the birds are totally undisturbed and feel comfortable on the pond and have acclimatised to any alterations you've made. Avoid the urge to sneak back and have a peak so you can post a few gloating pics on social media – save that carry-on for after Opening if you have to indulge.
- 2. Leave Some Cover** - It's tempting to remove all the larger trees around your pond or dam so passing birds can spot the water. Trees provide vital cover, though, and after being shot at several times early on in the season you can bet birds are looking for places they can safely hole up. Leaving some larger trees, islands and thick planting for refuge areas can make the birds feel safer.
- 3. Cheap Feed** - Before and during the season you can add cheap supplementary food into the ponds system to keep and hold ducks... you don't have to fork out on maize. Feijoas are an abundant (often free) source of food for ducks which coincide right with the waterfowl hunting season. Spread some buckets of the fruit around the edge of your pond and as it breaks down the insects provide amazing food for the ducks. Pea-straw bales are cheap and a few submerged 30-50cm in the water will break down and attract aquatic bugs the ducks love to snack on.
- 4. Take Your Decoys In** - The number of ponds we see with decoys left out all season is mind-boggling. The decoys quickly either become sun-bleached and bright, or covered in algae if left in the shade, some often partially sink. This is about as unnatural as you can get! Take your decoys in after each hunt – a bird that drops into an unattended decoy spread, and then swims around to discover they are plastic, will promptly take off. If there aren't decoys it would otherwise hold and present a jump shooting opportunity next time you arrive.
- 5. Rest Your Shooting Spot** - Too many small ponds and farm dams are overshot. Mallards are smart and if they see their mates falling from the sky they'll simply avoid a pond and won't return with new birds in tow. The small ponds I hunt in Wairarapa are shot no more than three times in a two-month season. This will vary according to the nearest reservoir of birds but based on experience it's a good rule of thumb for this area of the lower North Island.



TIPS TO IMPROVE YOUR POND

Want some more advice and assistance developing your pond? The Wellington-Taranaki Fish & Game team have plenty of resources available to help guide you whether you're starting from scratch or looking to improve an existing wetland.

Our staff are also happy to come and take a look at your site and offer advice and expertise. If you'd like one of our wetland information packs with loads of helpful tips, or want to discuss a duck pond with a staff member, give us a buzz on (06) 359 0409.



LAKE WAIRARAPA UPDATE

With the Treaty settlement process complete and a Statutory Management Board now in place for Wairarapa Moana, for the 2024 game bird hunting season Wellington Fish & Game will continue with their existing role in dealing with hunters harvesting waterfowl on the lake.

There is a proviso that no new structures (mimai) are to be built and no existing structures are to be extended during the season. Fish & Game recognises the generous gesture of mana whenua – Ngāti Kahungunu and Rangitane – in allowing the status quo to ensure for the coming season.



Hunting on Lake Wairarapa will continue to be allowed for the duration of the 2024 season



There are so many opportunities locally and further afield for those who hunt through the season. Photo: John Meikle.



THE ROVING HUNTER

One of the best ways to get the most out of your game bird hunting licence, and reap the greatest rewards, is to experience all that's on offer throughout the country, not just the Wellington and Taranaki regions. We encourage you to mix up your hunting by shooting more than just Opening Weekend (often the best weather arrives later in the season anyway) too. This means moving around your local region, hunting different areas and different environments, rather than just repeat visits to the same old stand or pond.

Seek out areas you've often thought might produce good hunting opportunities. This could be a riverbank duck camp you've seen in passing, it could be the big water you've heard other hunters rave about, it could be a secluded backwater you've come across when scanning Google Earth... Not every exploratory hunt will come off – but some will, certainly when combined with the right weather. And those that don't play out will offer valuable learning experiences. Set realistic expectations – often one duck to hand is all that you need for a truly successful outing.

This is particularly that case when experiencing hunting further afield – It may not always be what's made out on social media... As Tim Allen wrote in the latest issue of *Fish & Game magazine*, "get out and live your own experiences. Try new places in new regions. Exploit your hunting licence, the true value of which shouldn't be measured by 'limits', it should perhaps be measured by places visited, people met, and time spent in quiet solitude with a shotgun, a dog and always the comfort of knowing just how lucky we are here in New Zealand."

From chasing pheasants in the Central North Island plantation forests, shoveler and Black Swan on Lake Wairarapa, pukeko on the West Coast, chukor in the Central South Island high country and extending your duck season with a visit to Southland or chasing summer parries... all of these opportunities are available to you through your 2024 game bird hunting licence. Expand your horizons and make the most of your investment in a licence.

WETLANDS UPDATE

If you're interested in building or restoring a wetland on your property or in conjunction with a willing landowner, then now's the time to contact us to get your project underway. Wellington and Taranaki Fish & Game staff can provide free advice on designing and building wetlands (see page 4) and they can also act as referees for applications for financial assistance from the NZ Game Bird Habitat Trust. The Gamebird Habitat Trust receives \$5 from every game bird hunting licence sold and offers grants for wetland development which include funding towards the cost of machine hire for damming or excavation to create areas of open water. Applications to the NZ Game Bird Habitat Trust need to be in by June 30, 2024, and Fish & Game staff can help with the form filling. Applicants are usually notified of the outcome by early September, leaving plenty of time to organise works in the following summer.

Another funding option is Taranaki Fish & Game's Habitat & Hunting scheme which uses funds from the 2006 sale of the Tom Watt Wildlife Area at Tarata. The usual process is for an application to go to the Game Bird Habitat Trust first and the local Habitat & Hunting fund can then supplement the amount received. The same application form can be submitted to both funds, thereby minimising paperwork. Successful wetlands do not need to be large. From a duck breeding perspective, the key is to build shallow wetlands which have a fluctuating water level and 'soft' edges provided by rushes and the like. The good news is that these wetlands are often easy and cheap to build if you have a damp corner on your land somewhere.

Landowners and hunters wanting to create and enhance wetlands have been increasingly frustrated that the current National Environmental Standards for Freshwater regulations are making the task too difficult. It is hoped that the National-led government will amend permitted activity criteria so that the likes of Fish & Game can work with farmers and communities to restore and enhance wetlands and gain funding for projects.

It has become difficult to create wetlands like this, which received funding from the Game Bird Habitat Trust and Taranaki's Hunting & Habitat fund in 2019 - hopefully that might soon change. Photo: Allen Stancliff.



Introducing someone new to duck hunting is the best investment you can make in protecting the future of the pursuit. Photo: Hamish Carnachan

INVEST IN THE FUTURE OF HUNTING - 'REWILD' A MATE

Headwinds continue to build against duck hunting in New Zealand, something all hunters need to take heed of. Recently Fish & Game had to respond to a parliamentary petition seeking a ban on hunting native game birds. Given the challenges in differentiating between native grey ducks and introduced mallards, this would have effectively put an end to the pursuit. While we headed this off, new challenges are always emerging. Urbanisation and a societal disconnect with where food comes from, increasing focus on sentience of the species we hunt and loss of traditional hunting areas to other recreational pursuits are a snapshot of what we're facing.

Many hunters won't be aware of the significant effort Fish & Game invests in advocating for duck hunting and duck hunters. And in recent years we've also invested in improving relationships and better collaboration with the broader hunting community including retailers, the Game Animal Council and hunting media, so we can present a more unified front for our pursuits. Advocacy is a growing programme of work for Fish & Game at national and local government level, as well as in the public, to bolster our social licence and allow you and future generations of hunters to continue the proud tradition that so many will observe when Opening Day rolls around this season.

Our 'ReWild' campaign aims to highlight to the public not only the physical and mental health benefits of outdoor pursuits like waterfowl hunting, but the great conservation gains Fish & Game and hunters have made in wetland protection and creation, native planting and predator trapping work. The other aim of the ReWild campaign is normalising the pursuits among those who aren't engaged or know very little about them and build widespread support for hunting.

As well as supporting and sharing the ReWild campaign (scan the code for more details including some cool competitions), one of the best investments you can make to secure the future of game bird hunting in New Zealand is to introduce a mate or family member to the pursuit. Strength in numbers is where the survival of duck hunting rests – ultimately, we're only as strong as our numbers on the ground. When petitioning Parliament, or making submissions to local government, participation levels matter and can absolutely make the difference.

So, perhaps after the excitement of Opening Weekend has subsided, make an investment in the long-term future of duck hunting and hunting in general. Share your passion for the pursuits, share your love of the wetlands and wild places, and the waterfowl and wildlife that draws us there.

GET YOUR GUN DOG DUCK READY

Often hunters pre-season prep involves lots of time getting the gear and hunting possie ready, shooting clays to make sure the eye is in, investing hours pouring over the latest new 'toys', yet they neglect the hardest working member of their team – the duck dog! Following are some top tips to ensure you and your dog get the best out of the season:

1. In the months leading up to Opening, increase your dogs exercise with plenty of walks and, if possible, some swimming. During these times you can also go over commands and hand signals to reinforce training that may have slipped away during the off season.
2. Familiarise your dog with the area that you plan to hunt. This can be done by taking it with you when feeding out your pond, tagging you stand or undertaking maintenance like brushing up the maimai. This helps the dog's confidence because the sights and smells it associated with the area will be familiar when the big day rolls around and it's time to work.
3. Practices plenty of retrieves. This is best done at the pond you plan on shooting but don't disturb the area too close to Opening (ideally the site should be left undisturbed a month before the start of the season). You can practice in the local river or lake, or even in the back yard. Getting the commands and routine down is what's key.
4. Familiarise your dog with its hunting vest. They can feel uncomfortable or unusual having the restriction of a vest after the preceding summer months – you don't want the dog fidgeting and restless in the maimai when the season starts.

Doing this pre-season prep with your gun dog will ensure that it is in the best possible condition for Opening, and that you won't get frustrated because commands and recall have been forgotten. And the added bonus is that will also increase the bond between yourself and your best mate.

Your gun dog is the hardest working member of the hunting party so ensure it is fit and ready for the season ahead. Photo: Hamish Carnachan

Your gear doesn't need to cost the earth – much of what you need can be bought second hand or through Army surplus stores. Photo: Hamish Carnachan



BARE BONES DUCK HUNTING

Duck hunting has as much equipment designed to catch the hunter as it does the ducks.

Don't get caught up in the pre-season hype about so-called 'must have gear' – if you're just getting into the pursuit or have a mate or family member you're trying to kit-out, you can get in the game relatively inexpensively.

As well as your whole season game bird licence, the bare bones equipment you'll need is as follows:

- Shotgun – you can get a reasonable second-hand gun for between \$400 and \$600.
- Decoys – TradeMe has ridiculous deals on decoys; a dozen is 12 ample.
- Waders – your fishing ones will suffice otherwise a spare \$50 will net you some budget plastic numbers that'll do just fine.
- Camo clothing and waterproof jacket – the Army surplus store is your best bet, offering good deals on quality gear.

Army surplus stores also have a great array of camo netting or ghillie suits which negates needing outlay to build a hide. Throw in some ammo and you're basically good to go. The key is to make sure you veer away from bright clothing and equipment. And if you aren't confident in calling then it's best to let the decoys do the work to bring birds in.



New Hunting and Fishing Minister Todd McClay with Fish & Game CEO Corina Jordan

NEW GOVERNMENT, NEW MINISTER

We have a new government and a dedicated Minister for Hunting and Fishing in Todd McClay. Fish & Game will work closely with the Government to embed in law opportunities for freshwater fishing and hunting both now and into the future. This will include providing access to the places we fish and hunt, and ensuring valued introduced species are recognised.

We will ensure the role of Fish & Game is retained within conservation laws, and that firearms laws enable access to and use of firearms for recreational hunting. We will also be advocating on behalf of licence holders to ensure New Zealand's rivers and lakes are healthy, and wetlands are protected, while changes are made to reduce regulatory bureaucracy that some landowners are experiencing with plans to improve or develop new habitat.

Fish & Game will also continue to work with primary industry and catchment groups to implement collaborative solutions.

RECIPE - DEVILLED DUCK HEARTS

INGREDIENTS:

- Three tablespoons white flour
- Teaspoon mustard powder
- Half teaspoon cayenne powder
- Four to six duck hearts per person
- Brine or red wine
- Knob of butter
- Half a small onion, finely diced
- Quarter cup of chicken stock
- Half tablespoon Worcestershire sauce
- Buns
- Watercress

METHOD:

In a bowl mix together white flour, mustard powder, and cayenne powder (more or less depending on your spice tolerance).

Next, cut into quarters four to six duck (hearts per person) that have been soaking for a few hours in brine or red wine.

Roll in the flour mix, then into a medium-high heat pan with a big knob of butter. Fry for three or four minutes.

To the pan add onion. Once they've got some colour, add chicken stock and Worcestershire sauce.

Reduce the liquid, and then serve on buns with watercress.





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 eighth year we've banded mallards – well over 2000 ducks were banded this 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 work on their wetlands without red tape, which includes providing advice to the new government.

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 LICENCE HOLDERS – *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 – check out our ReWild campaign for more details (see page 6). 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. Numerous offences were picked up last season, making work for us and ruining non-compliant hunter's day. Don't let that be you this season.



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