

Opinion

Secret report into Box Flat wildlife massacre itself runs foul of secrets

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IT WAS an orgy of killing, one of the worst wildlife massacres Victoria had seen.

Many, if not most, of 150 normally law abiding citizens, appear to have collectively lost the plot.

On the opening morning of duck hunting season in March 2013, at a little-known small swamp near Boort, these shooters went feral and shot everything.

Swans, coot, grebe — rare and defenceless birds, game fowl — between 1000 and 2000 water birds.

Once the Saturday dawn had become day, the cannonade was finished and people came to their senses.

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There was apparently some guilt. Ducks — legal game birds — were left floating in the water along with protected native species.

No effort was made to pick them up for stocking the freezer — it seemed people didn't want any reminder of what had happened at Box Flat that morning.

Three hidden "caches" of "purposely hidden" birds were later found under lignum and shrubs at the swamp. Some of the shooters had made an effort to hide evidence of the killing.

Game officers and police visited the swamp twice that day but failed to see the atrocity that had just taken place.

It was only the next day, after a night-time wind had blown thick clumps of dead birds on to the shore, that the alarm sounded and authorities were alerted.

Nearby landowner and local MP, Peter Walsh, then Agriculture Minister, was said to be furious about Box Flat and immediately ordered that hunting there be stopped.

“These individuals should have the maximum penalties applied to them, and they should not have the privilege of hunting again,” Mr Walsh said.

The main hunters’ group, Field and Game Australia, saw its hard work to legitimise duck shooting as a sport set back a decade.

“It’s absolutely disgraceful,” FGA police director Rod Drew said at the time.

The group called on shooters to tell the truth to police.

That Sunday, the day after the shootings, Mr Walsh launched an investigation which was to take seven months and involve many members of his department, as well as Victoria Police.

Investigators managed to track down some of the Box Flat shooters.

Animal activists have long believed, because it was a privately owned wetland, the majority of the shooters were from the nearby Boort area. But locals blamed city shooters.

Investigators took 23 statements from hunters and landowners, and nine interviews were conducted.

“Eight additional people were spoken to and a large number of people were informally spoken to,” the investigation report said.

“Most hunters spoken to admitted to being present and hunting at Box Flat swamp at the relevant times.

“However, all persons questioned denied involvement in or knowledge of the offences.

“No person could identify any offenders,” the report said.

With no physical evidence and no one prepared to do, the case was closed.

It was a sad day for the hunting fraternity.

It was also an inglorious outing for the government's game officers, who the report says were actually tipped off on the Wednesday before the opening that "something might happen" at Box Flat.

Minister Walsh held back the report in the hope someone would speak up.

When *The Weekly Times* asked to see the DPI report in January last year and again in May, Freedom of Information Commissioner Lynne Bertolini said releasing the report could "prejudice the investigation".

The Weekly Times was advised to try again after the statute of limitations of successful prosecutions from Box Flat expired in March this year.



Laurie Levy

When *The Weekly Times* finally saw the report, almost half of it was deleted as it contained "exempt documents" and personal information.

The Coalition Against Duck Shooting has long called for the release of the report, with its spokesman, Laurie Levy, claiming the failure to prosecute hunters was a cover-up.

Last year duck activists offered a \$10,000 reward for information leading to charges over the Box Flat shooting.

Now no one can ever be charged for what happened there.

Box Flat swamp was dry this year and the 12-week Victorian duck hunting season was a middling success.

Box Flat is now a sorry part of hunting history. Perhaps there was never anything the Government could do to ensure it will not happen again.