

WildSafeBC Annual Report 2018

Fernie

Including West Fernie, Island lake Lodge, Fernie Alpine Resort and
Mt Fernie Provincial Park

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Executive Summary

This report describes the activities for the Fernie WildSafeBC Program between May 1st and October 15th 2018, including the highlights and challenges of delivering the program to residents and visitors in the City of Fernie and surrounding area. It also includes recommendations for the future of the WildSafeBC program and acknowledges the volunteers and community partners which are crucial for the program's success.

To date this year one injured black bear was destroyed for humane reasons at Fernie Alpine Resort and one habituated cougar was destroyed in the City of Fernie. Overall the number of Human Wildlife Conflict Reports (HWCR'S) was low in residential areas. There have been 45 HWCR's for black bears to date in 2018 compared to 157 in 2015. This can be attributed to a good berry crop, increased awareness regarding the management of wildlife attractants, a high mortality rate in 2015 and less garbage accessible to wildlife with the new automated wildlife resistant carts and bear resistant community dumpsters.

However, there was an increase in HWCR's involving incidents between people and wildlife in recreational areas as trail and backcountry use continues to increase. A child was attacked by a cougar and there were many reports of mountain bikers getting bluff charged by grizzly bears on trails. More people and highway traffic, a noticeable increase in trail use, more visitors, unsecured garbage, unmanaged fruit trees and new developments have all contributed to human-wildlife conflict.

Thanks to ongoing support and valuable community partnerships, the WildSafeBC Program is well received. The demand for our services continues to increase and is indicative of the program's success. The Junior Ranger Program was delivered to over 350 preschool and school-aged children, wildlife awareness and bear spray training to over 220 adults, over 570 contacts made at community events, 70,000 people reached through local media and 30,000 reached through social media. Recruiting suitable and reliable volunteers and educating a mix of new, seasonal, long-time residents and visitors about the storage of garbage indoors between collection days and fruit tree maintenance continue to be the main challenges for the program.

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Highlights from the 2018 Season

The WildSafeBC Program has been very well supported, received, and in demand from Fernie residents and visitors. Over the years the program has formed many valuable partnerships with various community organizations. Presence at community events, educational programs, support from local media, social networking, partnerships with community groups and consulting with City of Fernie staff and Council have all resulted in increased awareness, a decrease in HWCR's and human-wildlife conflict. The highlights of the Fernie WildSafeBC Program are presented below.

Public Displays at Community Events

The WildSafeBC public information display was set up at a variety of community events and continues to be a very effective way to deliver the program (fig. 1). The informative stand-up display, brochures, props (bear pelt, skull, claws, cougar pelt and skull, sample scat and rubber footprints) and banner attracted a lot of attention. The display was mainly attended by the WildSafeBC Community Coordinator (WCC), with the assistance of volunteers on occasion. All of these events were an ideal opportunity for people to approach us in a relaxed and social environment and discuss local wildlife issues. Many great contacts were made with the public and other exhibitors. WildSafeBC spent seven days at the following community events: Fernie Farmers Markets, Canada Day Event, Fernie Fall Fair, Children's Festival and Family Safety Day Awareness Event.



Figure 1. The WildSafeBC display at the Fernie Farmers Market.

Presentations to Groups of Interest

The demand for WildSafeBC presentations to groups of interest continues to grow. There were many requests for wildlife awareness, particularly cougar and moose as well as bears and how to safely use bear spray (fig.2). These presentations were delivered to front line resort staff at Island Lake Lodge, Fernie Information Centre, Fernie Alpine Resort, adult life skills groups, College of the Rockies Students, CBAL (new residents group), Fernie Women on Wheels group, Women's Resource Centre walking group, Fernie Flyers kids' mountain bike group, two public events at the bike park and the Fernie Fall Festival.



Figure 2. Fernie Alpine Resort staff learning how to prevent encounters with wildlife and safely use bear spray.

Children's Educational Program

Children are the greatest advocates of our program and can always be counted on to deliver the message to their parents. The WildSafeBC Junior Ranger Program was delivered to more than 350 preschool and school-aged children in Fernie (fig. 3). The program is delivered to Kindergarten, grade 2 and grade 5 students every year to ensure that eventually every child has access to the age appropriate program. The program was also delivered to day care, preschool and summer camps.

Presentations include wildlife biology and safety with bears, cougars, coyotes, deer, role plays, and the wild bear food game and a craft for younger children. The Junior Ranger Program (JRP) package was given to all students and greatly appreciated by teachers at Isabella Dicken Elementary, the Fernie Academy, French Immersion classes at École Sophie-Morigeau, Outdoor Connections, Fernie Child Care Society, Bright Beginnings and Creative Minds pre-schools.



Figure 3. Outdoor Connections Forest School.

The Use of Social Networking to Deliver our Program

Our online presence with the WildSafeBC Elk Valley website supported by Savage Marketing and WildSafeBC Facebook page have allowed residents and visitors throughout the Elk Valley and South Country to access information about wildlife sightings and give us the opportunity to reach a wider audience with our educational messages. To date in 2018 we've had 16,531 views and 50 posts on the WildSafeBC ElkValley online blog and 525 followers and 15,525 reaches on our WildSafeBC Elk Valley Facebook page. Our online presence combined with the use of social media to deliver our message to a wide range of people in a cost effective and timely manner continues to be very successful.

Support from Local Media

WildSafeBC has a weekly column in The Free Press where readers are updated on recent wildlife activity. WildSafeBC also provides the local radio stations, The Drive 99.1 and Summit 107, with a summary of wildlife activity every week. Wildlife updates are also posted on the WildSafeBC Elk Valley website supported by Savage Marketing and shared on the WildSafeBC Elk Valley Facebook page. This support is crucial in keeping both residents and visitors informed.

Fernie Upgrades to Automated System with Wildlife Resistant Carts

In June 2018, Fernie upgraded to an automated garbage collection system with residential wildlife resistant roll out carts fitted with a gravity locking system (fig.4). The carts have kept dogs, crows and small animals out as they will not open when knocked over but they are not bear resistant. The gravity locking system has reduced the amount of garbage and wind strewn litter accessible to wildlife. Residents have been requested to keep carts indoors between

collection days as per our local bylaws. To date, there have been no reports of bears accessing garbage from the carts.



Figure 4. The WSBC Community Coordinator using the new wildlife carts.

In addition to the carts, the City of Fernie has provided residents with communal bear resistant dumpsters in public locations that are accessible 24/7 and free of charge. This is a great option for second home owners, shift workers, visitors and people who have no garage or shed to keep garbage indoors between collection days. The combination of wildlife resistant carts and communal bear resistant dumpsters is a huge step forward in mitigating human-wildlife conflict.

WildSafeBC did consult with city staff and Council in an effort to encourage them to revisit and consider upgrading to certified bear resistant carts. This recommendation was overturned due to financial and time restrictions. WildSafeBC also worked closely with staff on preparing the educational messaging going out to residents about the proper use of the carts, keeping them secured between collection days and locked when put on the curb. This was also followed up with targeted door-to-door education with bylaw services in neighbourhoods with bear activity and non-complying residents. Support from local media was instrumental in delivering the message to a broad range of people via social media, articles, videos and interviews in local papers and radio stations.

Elk Valley Homesteading Volunteer Fruit tree Harvesting Initiative

WildSafeBC and a group of concerned residents spearheaded by Rachel Dortman and Elk Valley Homesteading Facebook Group worked together to form a fruit tree management initiative. We updated the fruit tree map from the 2009 Bear Hazard Assessment and delivered fruit tree management tips and information about harvesting assistance and disposing of fruit to just over 300 properties known to have fruit trees in Fernie.

Twenty five property owners in Fernie registered for assistance with fruit picking on four select days between late August and mid-September. Many properties had up to four apple trees.

Volunteers picked fruit from 18 of the 30 trees which added up to 8 pickup truckloads of apples. Four truckloads were used by volunteers to make pies, apple sauce, cider and juice, three were donated to farmers, and one was taken to the transfer station.

Owning a fruit tree in bear country is a big responsibility. Volunteer efforts were prioritized based on need. Seniors, people with disabilities, location such as proximity to a school or park and properties on the outside perimeter of town. Harvesting was scheduled when apples are ripe, softer translucent apples first followed by firm and crab apples.

Thank you to Rachel Dortman and Madeleine Bragg for spearheading this effort and to all of the volunteers, children and adults from across the Elk Valley who took part in this fruit picking initiative. This is a big step in the right direction and a noticeable positive difference in the overall management of apple trees in Fernie.

Wildsight's Apple Capture program also has a tree and tool sharing program with fruit picking, tree pruning equipment and apple presses available to lend. Many residents participated in the community apple press event at the Fall Fair and used local apples to press them into juice.

Challenges for the 2018 Season

The WildSafeBC program continues to be well supported and funded, therefore the challenges faced are minimal. The storage of garbage outside between collection days and fruit tree maintenance continue to be an issue. The main challenge remains the recruitment of suitable volunteers. A small but very effective crew of volunteers assisted with key tasks, including: assisting with public events and supporting our blog. Finding people who are able to help out on short notice with door-to-door visits and garbage tagging when bears are in the area is difficult. WildSafeBC Fernie has an excellent rapport with the Conservation Officer Service (COS) and bylaw services in Fernie. The COS, bylaw officers and the WCC have worked together on a number of occasions to visit problem areas and this has proven very effective.

Recommendations for the 2019 WildSafeBC Program

As Fernie continues to grow and develop so will the need to continue educational efforts. There will always be new people, new bears, and other wildlife. Educational visits with the COS and bylaw services highlighting the benefits of being a good neighbour by keeping garbage inaccessible to wildlife, cleaning up fruit trees and helping neighbours do the same is a great way to keep the program sustainable. The end result will be a cleaner and safer community for wildlife and people.

The recruitment of suitable volunteers is always a challenge. Sergeant Denny Chretien from the COS in Cranbrook suggested that the Aquatic Invasive Species Students could benefit from field experience gained by working with WildSafeBC Community Coordinators. This would also resolve the challenge of relying on volunteers to accompany lone WCCs doing door-to-door or garbage tagging educational activities.

The new wildlife resistant carts and bear resistant community bins have resulted in less garbage available to wildlife. Unmanaged fruit trees continue to be a root cause of human-wildlife conflict. WildSafeBC has requested that the City of Fernie lead by example by either cleaning up or replacing the ornamental crab apple trees on City property on 2nd Avenue and the large apple tree by the off-leash dog park in the Annex Park. Management of fruit trees on city property will hopefully motivate residents to follow suit.

Acknowledgements

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