

WildSafeBC Annual Report 2019

Elk Valley and South Country

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Executive Summary

The Elk Valley and South Country (EVSC) communities including the surrounding Regional District of East Kootenay (RDEK) Areas A & B (Figure 1) is a vast area with a combination of mining towns, rural areas, farming and ranching, summer cottages and campgrounds with a variety of attractants and potential for human-wildlife conflict. Through collaboration, education, and community solutions, WildSafeBC aims to reduce conflicts with wildlife. As of October 29th, 2019, there were just under 100 black and grizzly bear reports to the Conservation Officer Service (COS) this year in EVSC communities. Although the number of bear reports is above average, black and grizzly bear mortality has shown a decreasing trend since 2015 when 33 bears were destroyed in the EVSC. To date, six food conditioned and habituated bears (two black and four grizzly) have been destroyed this year.

Over 470 children participated in the WildSafeBC Ranger Program, 130 adults attended four wildlife awareness and bear spray workshops, and over 400 contacts were made at community events. Through 124 Facebook posts, there was a reach of more than 31,000 people and the WildSafeBC Elk Valley Facebook page had over 14,000 views. A broad range of people throughout a large geographic area were reached through 12 news articles in the Free Press, 18 radio interviews between The Drive and Summit 107 and 2 interviews on CBC Daybreak. WildSafeBC and the Wildlife Safety Response Officer (WSRO) assessed over 100 properties and educated residents about managing garbage and fruit trees in rural areas and communities.

The storage of garbage outdoors, unmanaged fruit trees, and an increase in trail and back country use, all contributed to human-wildlife conflicts. Ongoing support from sponsors, collaboration with community groups and support from local media has enabled WildSafeBC to reach a broad range of residents and visitors. Moving forward, WildSafeBC is looking forward to the opportunity to keep working with residents, visitors and collaborating with community groups to help keep wildlife wild and communities safe.

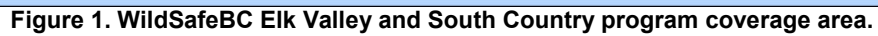


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Cover Photo: The WildSafeBC Elk Valley South Country Coordinator demonstrating safe use of bear spray at the Sparwood Mountain Bike Club event. Photo courtesy of Jen King.

Highlights from the 2019 Season

Wildlife Activity

As of October 29th, there were just under 100 black and grizzly bear reports to the COS this year in EVSC communities (Figure 2) which is above average since 2015. The increase in reports might be attributed to a high bear population due to plentiful natural berry crops and a higher bear birth rate the past few years. An increase in development, tourism, trail and backcountry use are other factors that may have contributed to an increase in human-bear conflict and bear reports to the COS.

Although the number of bear reports is higher than average, black and grizzly bear mortality has shown a decreasing trend since 2015 when 33 bears were destroyed in the region. To date, six (two black and four grizzly) food conditioned and habituated bears have been destroyed in 2019. This decrease in bear mortality may be attributed to availability of natural food and/or increased awareness and better management of wildlife attractants. This included the use of bear-resistant carts and commercial bins rather than leaving plastic bags on the curbside.

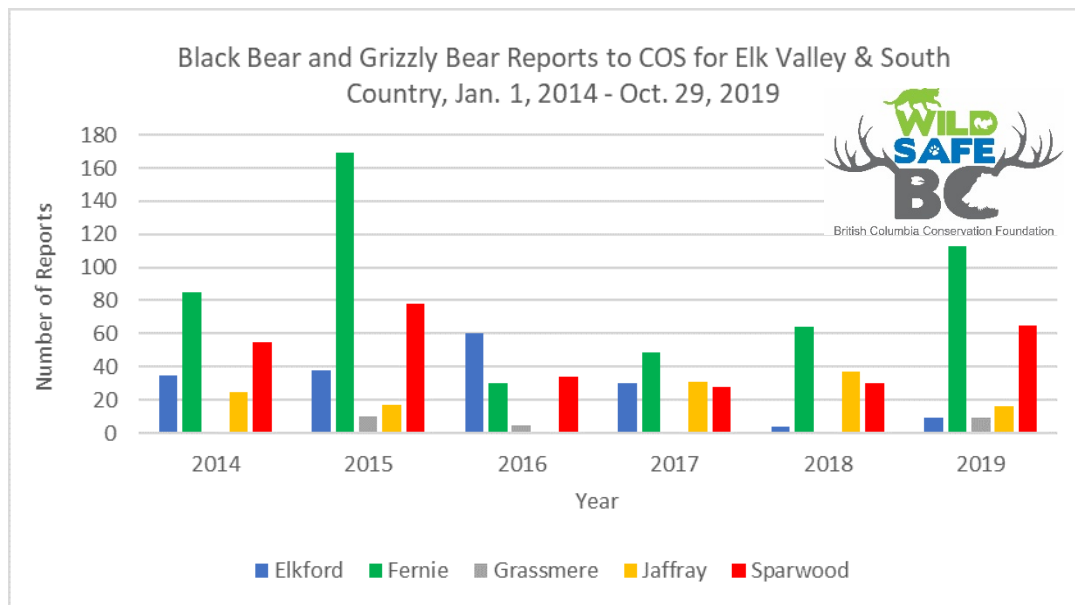


Figure 2. Black and grizzly bear reports to the COS from January 1, 2014 to October 29, 2019.

However, garbage remains the most reported attractant for all wildlife combined. While residential fruit trees are seldom reported they remain a significant attractant and require better management (Figure 3).

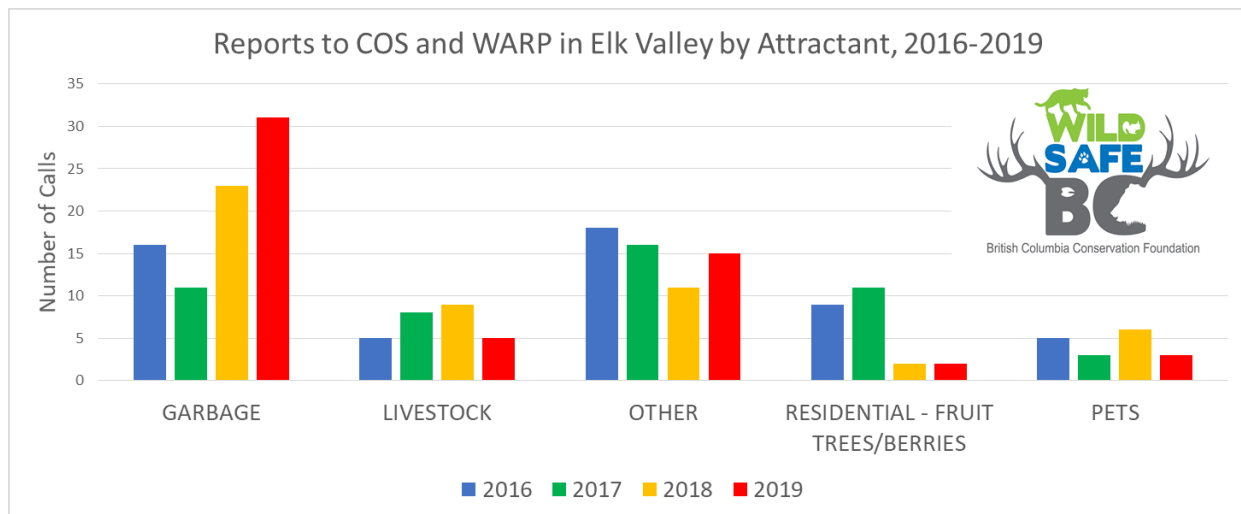


Figure 3. Garbage remains the most reported attractant in 2019 in Elk Valley.

WildSafeBC Ranger Program

The WildSafe Ranger Program was delivered to more than 470 preschool and school-aged children throughout the EVSC including: elementary schools, daycares, preschool and summer camps (Figure 4). The WildSafe Ranger Program is a keystone of the WildSafeBC Program and is a proven effective way to deliver the message to a broad range of households. The yearly increase in demand for presentations is indicative of the program's success.

A total of six school and children's groups participated in the WildSafe Ranger Program. More than 470 students became WildSafe Rangers and received WildSafe Ranger kits (Table 1).

Table 1. Schools and groups that received the Junior Ranger Program in 2019

school or group	grades or age group	students
Baynes Lake Guides and Sparks	7 to 12 yrs	20
Elkford Library Reading Group	8 to 13 yrs	19
Elkford Early Years Program X 2	3 to 5 yrs	37
FJ Mitchell Elementary Sparwood	kindergarten grade 2 and grade 5	215
Jaffray Elementary	kindergarten grade 2 and grade 5	72
Rocky Mountain Elementary Elkford	kindergarten grade 2 and grade 5	108



Figure 4. Kindergarten students learning to respond to bear encounters.

Presentations to Community Groups

Presentations on wildlife biology, preventing and responding to wildlife encounters, and safe use of bear spray were delivered to over 130 adults during presentations to groups of interest and public events (Table 2).

Table 2. Wildlife Awareness and Bear Spray Training

Organization	Attendees
Teck Sparwood	22
NUPQU Development Corporation Surveyors Lake	45
Sparwood Mountain Bike Club - Public	47
Elkford Library - Public	18

In addition, the WildSafeBC Coordinator was asked to provide program information and input at various community meetings. More than 200 people attended a Town Hall meeting in Jaffray organized by MLA Tom Shipika to address resident concerns about grizzly bear activity. WildSafeBC, the Conservation Officer Service, Ministry of Environment biologist and RDEK directors were all present. Program information was provided to Elkford Mayor and Council and all other applicants at a Special Budget Meeting with over 50 people attending. WildSafeBC also provided a program update to Council and staff in Sparwood.

Public Displays and 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 (Figure 5). More than 400 contacts were made with the public and other exhibitors. WildSafeBC spent four days at the following community events: Baynes Lake Farmers Markets, Sparwood Farmers Market, and the Fall Fair.



Figure 5. The WildSafeBC Elk Valley and South Country Coordinator and WildSafeBC display.

Door-to-Door Education and Garbage Tagging

Sparwood Heights was identified as an area with high human-wildlife conflict the last few years. In September 2019, the District of Sparwood (DOS) converted to an automated garbage collection system with certified bear-resistant carts. The carts are only bear resistant if the clasps are kept latched until the cart is placed on the curb the morning of collection.

The COS and WildSafeBC conducted a Wildlife Attractant Assessment (WAA) in Sparwood Heights. In May 2019, 90 households were visited and 59 personal contacts were made. Residents were provided with education and instruction to ensure the clasps are done up and the carts are kept indoors between collection days when possible as an additional barrier. Almost 40 residences were found to have unsecured garbage accessible to bears where the garbage cart was outdoors with the clasps left undone. Five residents reported that the clasps were faulty. They were advised to contact the District and have the clasps replaced by the contractor.

WildSafeBC collaborated with the DOS to provide additional education on the proper use and benefits of the automated bear resistant collection system. Education was initially provided last

fall when the new system was implemented. The DOS had a very simple message put on all the carts (Figure 6). The bear resistant carts are huge improvement over plastic bags which are easily assessable by crows, dogs, bears and rodents.



Figure 6 Sparwood bear resistant cart with simple educational message.

Jaffray was also identified as another hot spot for grizzly bear activity. Last fall there were more than 30 reports of grizzly bears in town. WildSafeBC and the COS visited 17 rural properties found to have apple trees. Nine personal contacts were made and eight notices reminding residents to clean up fruit trees were left. More than half the properties visited had made efforts to clean up fruit trees since the initial visit last fall 2018.

Wildlife awareness and attractant management tips were also included in newsletters for over 500 residents at Tie Lake and Fernie Alpine Resort. Garbage tagging was not conducted in Area A due to time restrictions and lack of volunteers available and there is no curbside collection in Area B.

Social Media and Press

In 2019, the WildSafeBC Elk Valley page grew 11% from 525 to 595 page likes and had an overall reach of 31,000 with 124 posts. The WildSafeBC Elk Valley website had over 14,000 views. The most effective posts were regarding people throwing food at a bear in Mount Fernie Provincial Park earlier in the summer. Although it was an unfortunate incident, it was a useful educational opportunity to explain the process of habituation and food conditioning of wildlife.

The WildSafeBC EVSC Coordinator submitted bi-weekly columns to the Free Press providing a summary of wildlife activity with an appropriate educational message. The columns generated a lot of discussion and interest from other media outlets such as local radio stations. The Drive 99.1 and Summit 107 contacted the coordinator on a regular basis for wildlife updates and

educational messages. A broad range of people throughout a large geographic area were reached through twelve news articles and eighteen radio interviews.

The WildSafeBC EVSC Coordinator was also interviewed live on CBC Daybreak about the wildlife attractant targeted education efforts and the Ministry of Transport Infrastructure (MOTI) constructing enclosed and/or electrified carcass pits in an effort to find a solution to manage grizzly bear attractants.

Wildlife in Area Signs

The WildSafeBC “Bear in Area” signs were placed in areas with current bear activity and served as a reminder for people to give bears space and a reminder to keep garbage and other attractants secure. The signs were left for one week at a time and removed if bears had moved on so that people didn’t become desensitized to the message. Signs were given to bylaw Officers in Sparwood and Elkford as it wasn’t always feasible to travel to these communities due to time and budget restrictions.

This initiative also proved to be a great opportunity to engage the neighborhood, start discussions and create awareness for people passing by, long-time residents, new seasonal residents and visitors. The signs are very effective at getting the message out to a wider audience when it is not always possible to do door-to-door canvassing.

Collaborations

The WildSafeBC Program has been very well supported, received, and in demand from organizations and residents throughout the EVSC. Over the years, the program has formed many valuable partnerships and has collaborated with many community organizations. Two public Wildlife Awareness and Bear Spray Demonstrations were co-hosted by other organizations: The Sparwood Mountain Bike Club, Sparwood Golf Club and the Elkford Public Library. These collaborative efforts proved very successful and resulted in very well-attended events.

Province-wide Initiatives for 2019

Bear Spray

More than 130 people participated in 4 Wildlife Awareness and Safe Use of Bear Spray training sessions this year in the EVSC (Table 2). The three public events were very well attended (Figure 7) and the request from groups of interest to return every year is indicative of the success and quality of the program. The feedback received in the surveys was all very positive.



Figure 7. WildSafeBC and Sparwood Mountain Bike Club bear spray event at the Sparwood Golf Club.

Indigenous Awareness and Engagement

The WildSafeBC EVSC Coordinator received a request to do a Wildlife Awareness and Bear Spray Presentation for the Nupqu Development Corporation which specializes in natural resource management within the Ktunaxa Traditional Territory and is proudly owned by all communities of the Ktunaxa Nation. Over 45 staff and management attended the presentation. This was a great first step in engaging with Indigenous groups.

Special Initiatives

Last October 2018, the WildSafeBC WVSC Coordinator was asked by the COS to do some education in the Jaffray area as there had been over 30 grizzly bear-related calls. The coordinator visited over 20 properties with fruit trees. Many residents seemed to feel that their fruit trees were a much less significant concern for human-wildlife conflict compared to the nearby carcass pits. More than 200 people attended a Town Hall meeting in Jaffray organized by MLA Tom Shipika to address resident concerns about grizzly bear activity. WildSafeBC, the Conservation Officer Service, Ministry of Environment Biologist and RDEK Directors were all present.

In September 2019, Ministry of Transport and Infrastructure (MOTI) announced the completion of the first enclosed carcass pit surrounded by electric fencing in Elko. Two more facilities are planned for Sparwood and Yahk along Highway 3. This is a great initiative by MOTI to prevent human-wildlife conflict and a fabulous collaborative effort and leadership by example. A properly constructed and maintained electric fence is a proven and effective way to prevent bears from accessing attractants such as road kill, chicken coops, livestock, orchards and compost. When agencies such as MOTI are seen to take initiatives to secure attractants, it is much easier for a coordinator to motivate residents to do the same.

Challenges and Opportunities

The EVSC is a vast area with a combination of mining towns, rural areas, farming and ranching, summer cottages and campgrounds with a variety of attractants and human-wildlife conflict. As the RDEK continues to grow and develop there will always be new people, new bears/wildlife and the potential for conflict. Innovative education efforts and collaboration with other groups and agencies are essential to help inform a diverse group of people in a vast geographic area.

The following initiatives should be prioritized for 2020:

- Door-to-door education campaigns in areas with high wildlife activity.
- Education campaigns focusing on hazards and solutions through social media, news articles, radio interviews, workshops, newsletters and flyers.
- Collaboration with community organizations to organize educational workshops to reach a broader range of people.
- Deliver the WildSafeBC Ranger Program to preschool and school-aged children
- Promote the importance of preventing encounters in recreation areas and encourage safe use of bear spray
- Initiate an educational campaign aimed at businesses to promote the “WildSafeBC Business Pledge” that proved very successful in Kimberley.
- Attend a variety of community events with the educational WildSafeBC display.
- Deliver posters, brochures and other educational materials to central locations such as gas stations, campgrounds and other public places.
- Continue working the WSRO in rural areas where it is often difficult to get volunteers.
- Continue building relationships with the Ktunaxa Nation.

Acknowledgements

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