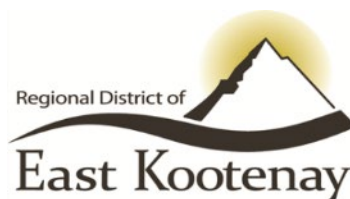


WildSafeBC Annual Report 2020

Elk Valley and South Country

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Executive Summary

This report describes the activities of the WildSafeBC Elk Valley and South Country Program between May 1 and November 30, 2020. The Elk Valley and surrounding Regional District of Elk Valley (RDEK) Area A and South Country and surrounding RDEK Area B (Figure 1) are situated within Ktunaxa traditional territory. The area is a combination of mining towns, rural areas, farming and ranching, summer cottages and campgrounds with a variety of attractants and human-wildlife conflict.

Collaboration with community groups has enabled WildSafeBC to reach a broad range of people and use initiative, innovation and education to ultimately reduce human-wildlife conflict and the number of bears destroyed in 2020. Although ungulates are the most reported species to the Conservation Officer Service, grizzly bear activity was reported in residential areas, and there was a significant increase in trail and backcountry use. More human-wildlife sightings and encounters resulted in closures of popular trails to protect wildlife and trail users. To date, two food-conditioned and human-habituated black bears have been destroyed this year. Black and grizzly bear mortality has shown a decreasing trend since 2015 when 33 bears were destroyed in the Elk Valley South Country program area.

The WildSafeBC Community Coordinator (WCC) performed outreach activity with the goal of preventing conflict with wildlife in the community. Following COVID-19 safety precautions, several of the standard WildSafeBC program activities were modified to ensure proper sanitization and physical distancing measures were in place. Group sizes were smaller, presentations were held outdoors. The WildSafeBC display booth was set up at trail heads and transfer stations as community events were cancelled and farmers' markets were restricted.

Over 240 children participated in the WildSafeBC Ranger Program and 220 adults attended six wildlife awareness and bear spray workshops via Zoom video conference and in person. A hiking and biking and bear safety video was produced with the Sparwood Bike Club. Over 100 people were reached through display booths at the trail head and transfer station. Over 130 contacts were made during door-to-door visits at Fernie Alpine Resort (FAR), 10 garbage bins were tagged in Sparwood and 200 residents received WildSafeBC newsletters at FAR and Rosen Lake. Two businesses signed the WildSafe Business Pledge and five campgrounds are working on implementing the WildSafeBC Bare Campsite Program.

The WildSafeBC Elk Valley Facebook page grew 63% in 2020 from 595 to 984 page followers with 120 posts. The WildSafeBC Elk Valley blog had a total of 120 posts and over 14,000 views. A broad range of people, throughout a large geographic area were reached through 14 news articles in the Free Press and 19 radio interviews on "The Drive" and "Summit 107".

The storage of garbage outdoors, unmanaged fruit trees and an increase in trail and back country use, all contribute to human-wildlife conflict. 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.

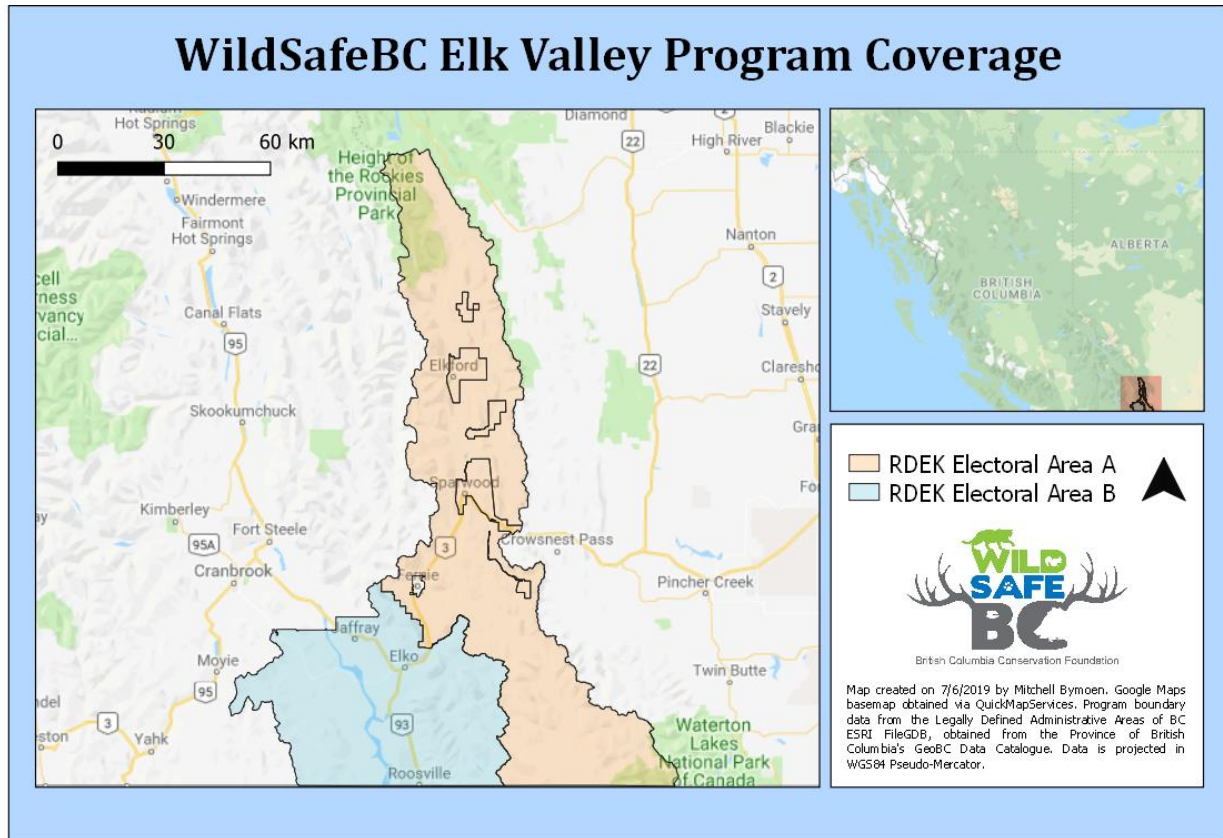


Figure 1. WildSafeBC Elk Valley and South Country

Table of Contents

Executive Summary	1
Highlights from the 2020 Season	4
Wildlife Activity	4
WildSafeBC COVID-19 Mitigation.....	5
WildSafe Ranger Program.....	5
Presentations to Community Groups	6
Display Booths	7
BC Goes Wild.....	8
Door-to-Door Education and Bin Tagging	8
Social Media and Press.....	8
Wildlife in Area Signs.....	9
Collaborations	9
WildSafe Business Pledge.....	10
WildSafeBC Bare Campsite Program	10
Special Initiatives.....	11
Challenges and Opportunities	11
Acknowledgements.....	12

Table of Figures

Figure 1. WildSafeBC Elk Valley and South Country.....	2
Figure 2. Reports to the COS and WARP by species, January 1 2016 to October 31 2020.	4
Figure 3. Black bear reports to COS and WARP by attractant, January 1 2016 to October 31 2020.....	5
Table 1. Schools that received the WildSafe Ranger Program in 2020.	6
Figure 4. Outdoor Connections Forest School Group.....	6
Table 2. Wildlife Awareness and Bear Spray Training.....	6
Figure 5. WildSafeBC Coordinator Kathy Murray teaching a student how to safely use bear spray. Photo courtesy of Jen King.....	7
Figure 6. The WSBC Community Coordinator at a trail head display	7
Figure 7. WildSafeBC wildlife safety clinics in the local paper.	9
Figure 8. WildSafeBC coordinator working with the Sparwood Mountain Bike Club to promote trail safety.	10

Cover Photo: Grizzly bear passing through backyards on Highline Drive at Fernie Alpine Resort. Photograph by Marianne Agnew.

Highlights from the 2020 Season

Wildlife Activity

Reports made to the Conservation Officer Service (COS) through the RAPP line (1-877-952-7277) and the online form (<https://forms.gov.bc.ca/environment/rapp/>) are available to the public through the WildSafeBC Wildlife Alert Reporting Program (WARP) on the WildSafeBC website. This data is updated daily and this report for Elk Valley and South Country communities and includes data from January 1, 2016 to October 31, 2020. Ungulates remain the most reported species in this vast area followed by black and grizzly bears (Figure 2). Grizzly bear activity was reported throughout the area the entire season. Two individual grizzly bears were reported daily passing through backyards at FAR in the spring.

A significant increase in backcountry and trail use may have resulted in an increase in human-wildlife sightings and encounters. Several grizzly bear reports on Heiko’s Trail in August resulted in the popular trail being closed for two weeks. Josephine Falls Trail in Elkford was also closed due to grizzly bear activity. Grizzly bears were reported causing property damage in Grassmere and grizzly bear activity was reported just outside Sparwood in September. Garbage remains the most reported bear attractant in 2020 although reports are showing a decreasing trend since 2016 (Figure 3). This reduction may be attributed to communities making positive steps in bear proofing solid waste management systems. Fruit trees are also a significant source of conflict but continue to be under reported.

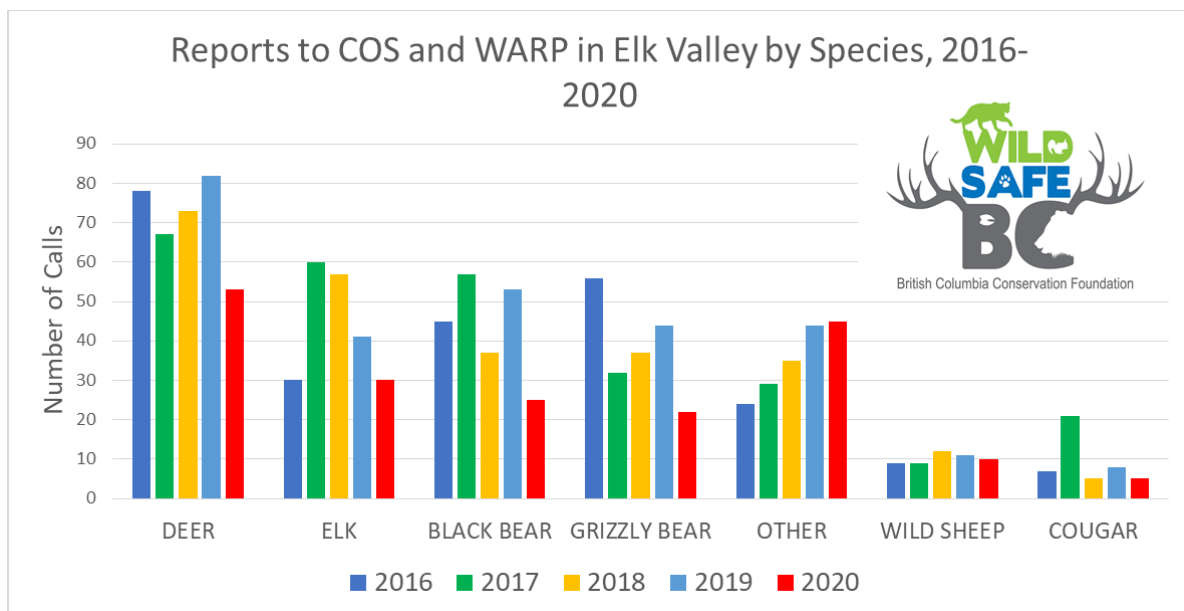


Figure 2. Reports to the COS and WARP by species, January 1, 2016 to October 31, 2020.

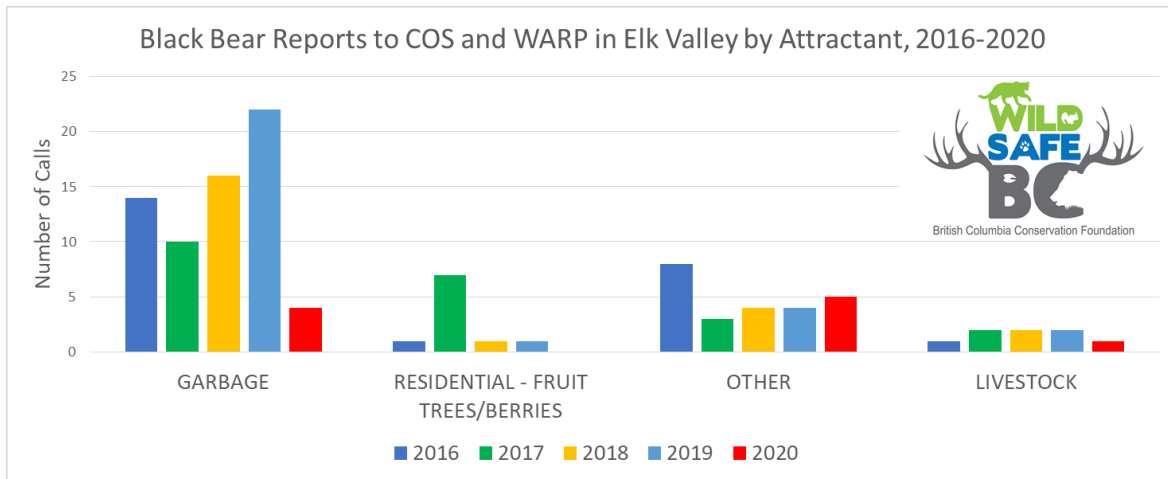


Figure 3. Black bear reports to COS and WARP by attractant, January 1, 2016 to October 31, 2020.

WildSafeBC COVID-19 Mitigation

All of the activities performed this season followed safety guidelines provided by the Province, WorkSafeBC and/or the BC Conservation Foundation’s Safety Coordinator. The WCCs were required to provide safety plans if they were organizing events where people would congregate. Wherever possible, in person activities were replaced with video conferencing. WildSafeBC adapted and modified requirements as the Province moved from Phase 1 to Phase 3. The WCCs worked closely with their local communities to ensure that all local requirements and restrictions were respected.

WildSafe Ranger Program

The WildSafe Ranger Program introduces youth to the concept of human-wildlife conflict. A total of four schools participated in the WildSafe Ranger Program through webinars and outdoor presentations that allowed for physical distancing. Over 240 students became WildSafe Rangers and received kits (Table 1, Figure 4). Due to COVID-19, groups were much smaller and all sessions were held outdoors so fewer students were reached.

Table 1. Schools that received the WildSafe Ranger Program in 2020.

School or group	Grade	No. of Students
Outdoor Connections Forest School x 3	preschool and Grade 3	39
Elkford Secondary School x 1	Grades 8, 9, 10	50
Sparwood Elementary	Grade 2	60
Jaffray Elementary	Kindergarten, Grade 2	37
CBEEN wild voices on zoom	Grades, 2, 3, 4, 5	60



Figure 4. Outdoor Connections Forest School Group

Presentations to Community Groups

The WCC provided presentations on wildlife biology, preventing and responding to wildlife encounters and safe use of bear spray to over 220 adults via Zoom and in person to various groups of interest (Table 2, Figure 5).

Table 2. Wildlife Awareness and Bear Spray Training

Organization	Attendees
Wildlife Safety for public on zoom x 2	70
Fernie Alpine Resort Staff via zoom	60
Sparwood Mountain Bike Club Public x 2	72
Elkford Library Public	18



Figure 5. WildSafeBC Coordinator Kathy Murray teaching a student how to safely use bear spray. Photo courtesy of Jen King

Display Booths

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, WildSafeBC was not permitted to attend farmers' markets and large community events were cancelled. An increase in trail and backcountry use created a demand for us to educate trail users about preventing and responding to wildlife encounters and the safe use of bear spray. The WildSafeBC display booth was set up at the Fiorentinos parking area trail head in Sparwood on Highway 3 before and after both Wildlife Safety events, July 28 and September 3, and at the Tie Lake Transfer Station in the South Country on July 18 (Figure 6). Just over one hundred contacts were made.



Figure 6. The WSBC Community Coordinator at a trail head display

BC Goes Wild

There was a significant increase in trail, campground and back country use in the Elk Valley and South Country this year. More people in the back country resulted in a greater potential for human wildlife conflict and a demand for wildlife safety and bear spray workshops and presence at trail heads. Two separate organizations partnered with WildSafeBC to cohost BC Goes Wild events which were really well supported and attended.

Sparwood: The Sparwood Running group cohosted the Wildlife Awareness and Bear Spray workshop and the WildSafeBC display was set up at the Fiorentino Trail head one hour after the presentation. There were 32 people at the workshop and 18 contacts were made at the trail head.

Elkford: The Elkford public library cohosted the Wildlife Awareness and Bear Spray workshop and 18 people attended.

Door-to-Door Education and Bin Tagging

Door-to-door education was done at FAR four times in the spring due to grizzly bear activity on Highline drive. A total of 62 contacts were made.

Garbage bin tagging consists of placing a highly visible and removable warning sticker on top of containers set curbside the day before collection. Garbage tagging was conducted in Sparwood heights where there is a history of conflict associated with garbage. Out of a total of 600 properties surveyed, 6 garbage carts were out on the curb the night before collection and were tagged.

Newsletters including wildlife safety and attractant management were prepared by WildSafeBC and distributed to the homeowners association at FAR (86 homes) and Rosen Lake (102 homes). This was a very effective way to distribute information to a large group of residents in a vast area. Garbage tagging and door-to-door were not done in the South Country as there is no curbside collection and it is a very large rural area. Instead, education was delivered through a display booth at the transfer station as well as posters and brochures which were delivered and placed in public areas.

Social Media and Press

The WildSafeBC Elk Valley Facebook page grew 63% in 2020 from 595 to 984 page followers with 120 posts. The WildSafeBC Elk Valley website had a total of 120 posts with over 14,000 views.

The WildSafeBC Fernie Coordinator submitted regular articles and was contacted to do several interviews with the Free Press (Figure 7). The Wildlife Safety article generated a lot of interest and resulted in a big demand for WildSafeBC Safety presentations. The “Drive 99.1” and “Summit 107” radio station also 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 14 news articles and 19 radio interviews.



Figure 7. WildSafeBC wildlife safety clinics in the local paper.

Wildlife in Area Signs

The WildSafeBC “Wildlife in Area” signs were placed in areas with current activity and served as a reminder for people to give wildlife space and a reminder to keep garbage and other attractants secure. The signs were left for one week at a time and removed if wildlife 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 a very effective tool to get the message out to a broad range of people in a larger geographic area 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 RDEK. Over the years, the program has formed many valuable partnerships and has collaborated with many community organizations. This

season, three public Wildlife Awareness and Bear Spray Demonstrations were co-hosted by The Sparwood Mountain Bike Club, Sparwood Running Club, and the Elkford Public Library (Figure 8). These collaborative efforts proved successful and resulted in well-attended events. WildSafeBC and Recreation Sites and Trails BC also collaborated on issues related to hiking and camping on Heiko's Trail following a number of human-grizzly bear encounters. A Hiking, Biking and Bear Safety video was produced with the Sparwood Bike Club.



Figure 8. WildSafeBC coordinator working with the Sparwood Mountain Bike Club to promote trail safety.

WildSafe Business Pledge

The WildSafe Business Pledge Program has been developed to encourage businesses to set good examples in their community on how to safely co-exist with wildlife. To take the pledge, a business is required to follow best practices in solid waste management, provide adequate training to staff and support WildSafeBC safety and conflict reduction information. In return, WildSafeBC will provide ongoing support to the business in the form of staff training, WildSafeBC materials (subject to budget constraints) and a WildSafeBC Business Pledge poster. In 2020, two businesses have signed the pledge while many others have been taking positive steps forward and the pledge is the final formal step required.

WildSafeBC Bare Campsite Program

The WildSafeBC Bare Campsite Program is a new initiative in 2020. Through the program, WildSafeBC is able to provide clear guidelines and resources to assist campground operators in maintaining a safe campsite for both people and wildlife. There are three BC Provincial Parks and two independent campgrounds that are in the process of getting the necessary

infrastructure, resources and staff training and have taken positive steps forward to support the WildSafeBC Bare Campsite Program.

Special Initiatives

After a recommendation from the WCC in 2017, the District of Sparwood (D.O.S.) has set a precedent for other Elk Valley and BC communities by upgrading to certified bear-resistant residential containers in 2018 and requiring all businesses to have certified bear-resistant commercial dumpsters by 2020. The D.O.S. also placed notices in the local paper on a regular basis reminding residents to keep bear-resistant containers locked between collection days and manage fruit trees. The WCC provided education on the use of these bins and placed educational decals on bear-resistant dumpsters that reminds residents to keep the bins locked.

Thanks to these efforts, there has been a significant reduction in reports of bears accessing garbage and human-wildlife in the community. Sparwood continues to support every aspect of the WildSafeBC program.

Challenges and Opportunities

The Elk Valley, South Country, and RDEK Areas A and B is a large 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. All of these groups have different levels of understanding and tolerance for wildlife, especially grizzly bears, and require innovative educational efforts and collaboration with other community groups and agencies to help educate this diverse group of people.

As the area continues to grow and develop there will always be new people, new bears, and other wildlife. Grizzly bear activity was reported throughout the area the entire season. There were daily reports of grizzly bears passing through backyards at FAR in the spring and fall. A significant increase in backcountry and trail use caused an increase in human-wildlife sightings and encounters. Several grizzly bear reports on trails in August resulted in trail closures. Grizzly bears were reported causing property damage in Grassmere and grizzly bear activity was reported just outside Sparwood in September. An increase in traffic on Highway 3 has contributed to grizzly bear mortality due to collisions with vehicles.

In order to continue reducing human-wildlife conflicts in the region, the following initiatives should be implemented in 2021:

- Continue existing education campaigns and reach a broader range of people through collaboration with community organizations such as: Sparwood Trails Alliance, Sparwood Bike Club, Sparwood Running Club, Elk Valley Homesteading, Rosen Lake and F.A.R. Homeowners Associations, Baynes Lake Lions Club, and Girl Guides.

- Promote the importance of preventing encounters in recreation areas and encourage safe use of bear spray with local bike shops and at local trail heads.
- Engage and recognize more businesses through the WildSafeBC Business Pledge.
- Continue progress started with the Bare Campsite Program with East Kootenay Parks and other independent campgrounds.
- Deliver posters, brochures and other educational materials to central locations such as gas stations, campgrounds and other public places.
- Continue building relationships with the Ktunaxa. Schedule a meeting with the Terrestrial Biologist for the Ktunaxa Nation to follow up on our initial email and telephone conversations. Continue communications with the Aboriginal Education Coordinator to reschedule a presentation that was planned for this year but had to be cancelled.

The WildSafeBC Program continues to be very well supported, received and in demand from various organizations, residents and visitors throughout the RDEK. Over the years the program has formed many valuable partnerships and has collaborated with many community organizations to help keep wildlife wild and communities safe.

Acknowledgements

WildSafeBC is grateful for the generous support the program receives from sponsors, partners, and volunteers. Thanks to our sponsors: Ministry of Environment and Climate Change Strategy, Columbia Basin Trust, British Columbia Conservation Foundation, District of Sparwood, District of Elkford, and the RDEK. Our community partners have provided invaluable support and guidance. Thank you to: Conservation Officers Patricia Burley, Jeff Piwek and Ryan Gordon, Savage Marketing, Fernie.com, Free Press, The Drive 99.1 and Summit 107 radio stations, Sparwood Mountain Bike Club, Elkford Library and volunteers Dan Savage and Jen King. Finally, thank you to everyone for making an effort to be a good neighbor this season by removing wildlife attractants from their properties and preventing human-wildlife conflict when out in recreational areas. Let's keep wildlife wild and our community safe!