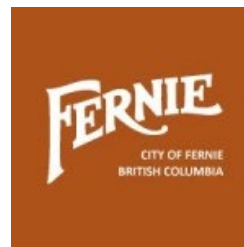


# WildSafeBC Annual Report 2020

## Fernie

Prepared by: Kathy Murray, WildSafeBC Fernie Coordinator



## Executive Summary

This report describes the activities of the WildSafeBC Fernie Program between May 1 and November 30. The City of Fernie (Figure 1) is located on traditional Ktunaxa Territory. 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.

From January 1 to October 31, there were 92 black bear reports this year which is higher than the 5 year average of 53. Garbage remained the most reported attractant followed by fruit trees. Grizzly bear activity was just above average with 15 reports so far this year. This may be a result of natural food availability, a long cold spring, more household garbage produced by people staying home, and a significant increase in back country and trail use due to COVID-19 restrictions.

The WildSafeBC Community Coordinator (WCC) performed outreach activities 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 and presentations were held on zoom or outdoors. The WildSafeBC display was set up at trail heads as community events were cancelled and farmers' markets were restricted.

Over 300 children participated in the WildSafeBC Ranger Program and 175 adults attended wildlife awareness and safe use of bear spray workshops via Zoom and in person. More than 200 contacts were made when the WildSafeBC display was set up at the Fairy Creek and Montane trail heads. During door-to-door visits at the Cedars, along 4<sup>th</sup> avenue, Ridgmont, the Annex and Mountainview, 250 contacts were made. During garbage tagging, 22 carts received educational stickers when carts were set out the night before collection. There were two businesses that signed the WildSafeBC Business Pledge and the Fernie RV Resort and Campground is committed to participating in 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 between "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 people in Fernie safe and wildlife wild.

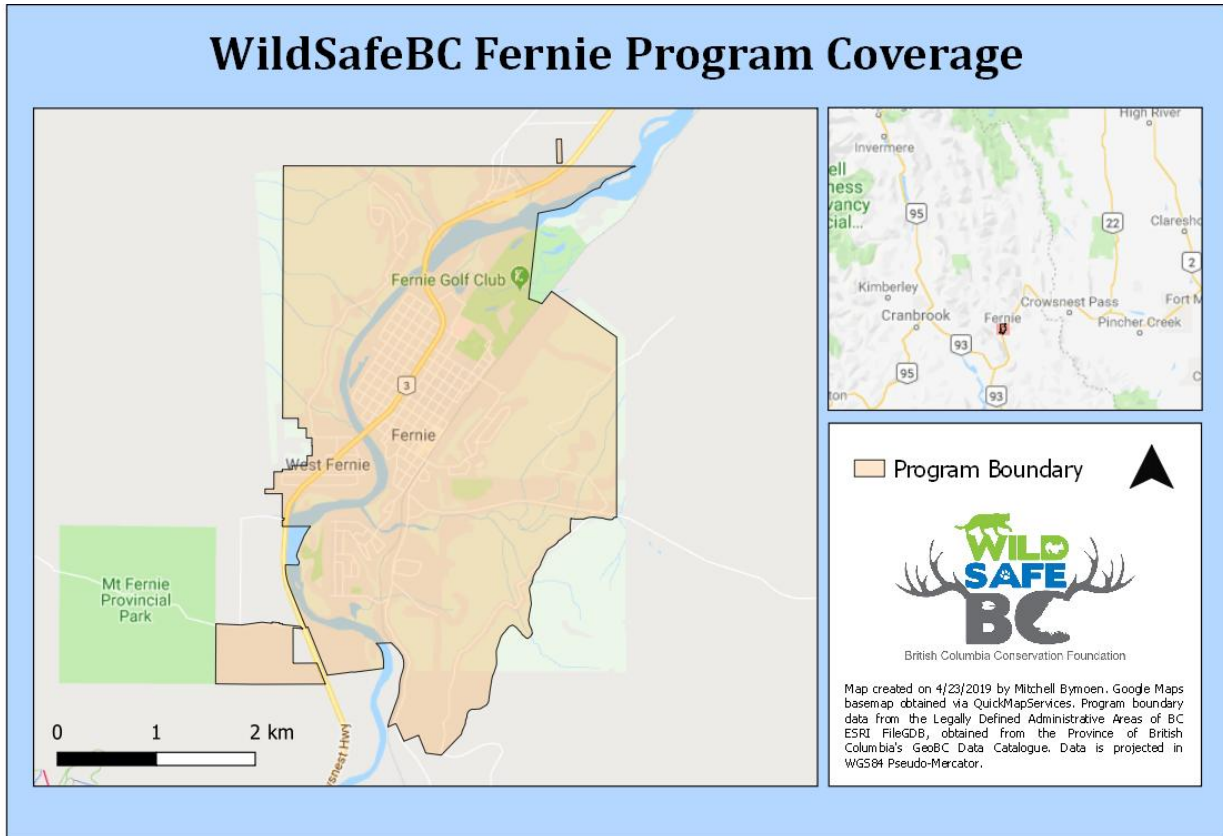


Figure 1. WildSafeBC Fernie Program Delivery Area

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**Cover Photo:** WildSafeBC display booth at the Fernie Info Centre

## 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 Fernie includes data from January 1, 2016 to October 31, 2020 (Figure 2).

So far this year, there were 92 black bear reports this year which is higher than the 5 year average of 53. Garbage remained the most reported attractant followed by fruit trees. Grizzly bear activity was just above average with 15 reports so far this year. This may be a result of natural food availability, a long cold spring; more household garbage produced by people staying home and a significant increase in back country and trail use due to COVID-19 restrictions.

To date, two human-habituated and food-conditioned black bears were destroyed in Fernie this year, one on 3<sup>rd</sup> avenue and the other at the Mt Fernie Provincial Park campground. One grizzly bear was hit and killed by a train by Coal Creek and another was hit by a vehicle on Highway 3. Although the number of calls to the COS is higher than average the bear mortality rate is showing a decreasing trend since 2015 when 22 bears were destroyed.

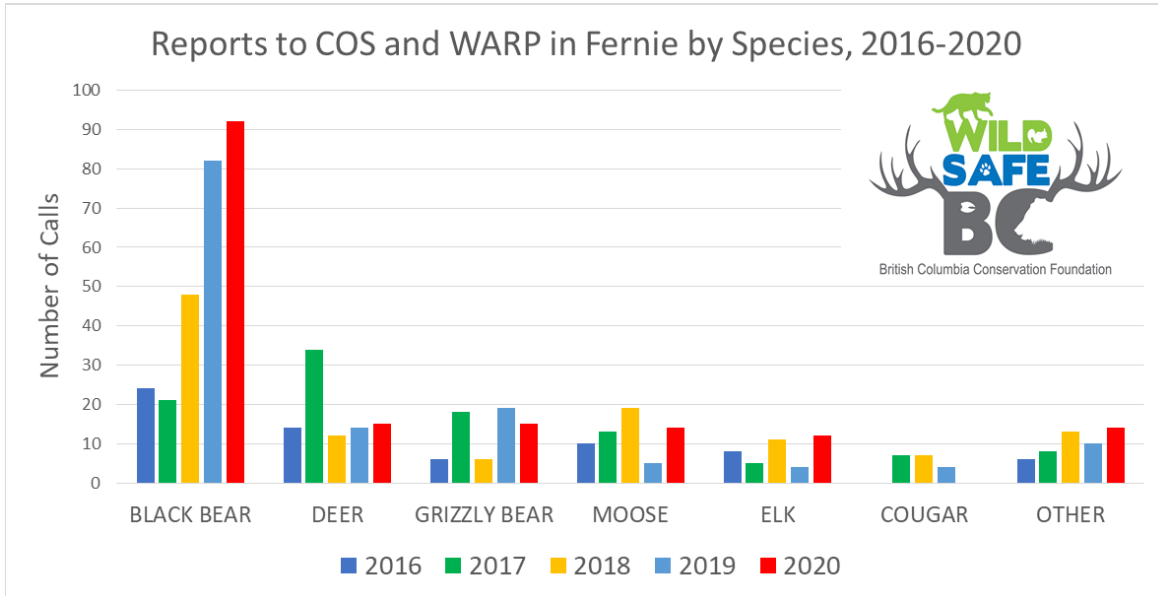


Figure 2. Reports to the COS and WARP by species, January 1, 2016 to October 31, 2020.

Garbage remains the most reported bear attractant in 2020 (Figure 3) although reports are showing a decreasing trend since 2016. This reduction may be attributed to Fernie making positive steps in reducing the amount of garbage and wind strewn litter accessible to wildlife

with gravity locking residential carts and community bear-resistant dumpsters. Fruit trees are also significant but continue to be under reported.

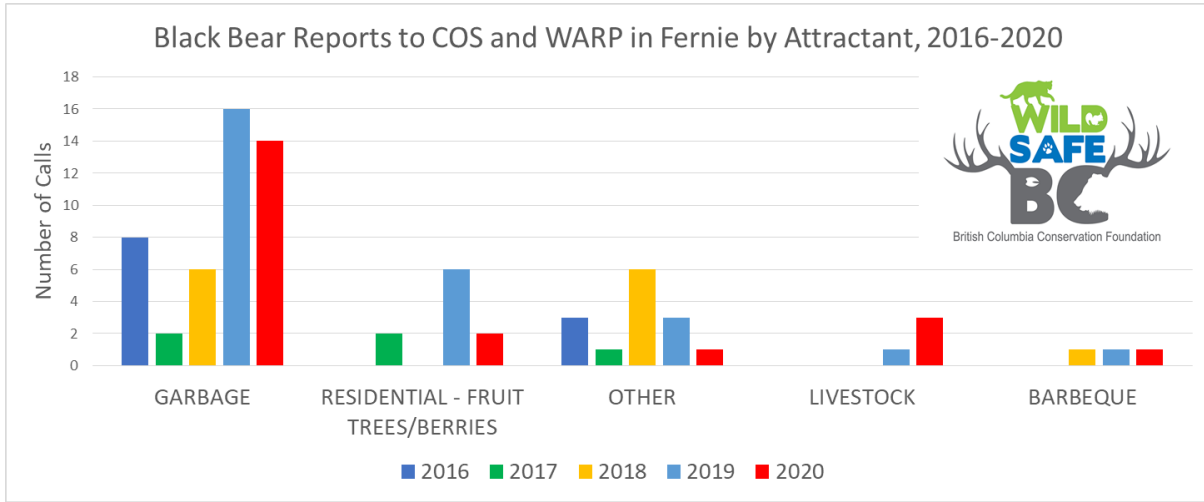


Figure 3. Black bear reports to the COS and WARP by attractant, January 1, 2016 to October 31 2020.

### 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. Schools, pre-schools and a variety of groups participated in the WildSafe Ranger Program through webinars and outdoor presentations that allowed for physical distancing. Over 300 children became WildSafe Rangers and received WildSafeBC Ranger kits (Table 1, Figure 4).

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

School/Program	Grade/ Age	Children
The Fernie Academy/Zoom	Grade 1	45
IDES Elementary	Kindergarten	90
Fernie Child Care Society	3 to 5 yrs	22
Fernie After School Program	8 to 12 yrs	25
Fernie After School Program	5 to 7 yrs	15
Blue Lake Youth Group	10 to 12 yrs	18
CBEEN wild voices/zoom	Grade 3 to 5	70
Bright Beginnings Daycare	3 to 5 yrs	25



**Figure 4. The WildSafeBC Outdoor Program allowed for physical distancing.**

## Presentations to Community Groups

The WCC provided presentation on wildlife biology, preventing and responding to wildlife encounters and safe use of bear spray was delivered to over 175 adults via Zoom and in person outdoors to various groups of interest (Table 2, Figure 5).

**Table 2. Wildlife Awareness and Bear Spray Training.**

Organization	Attendees
Public events on Zoom x 2	70
Fernie Info Centre public event x 2	85
MAST outdoor education program	22



**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 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 was set up at Fernie Information Centre Fairy Creek Trail head before and after both Wildlife Safety events and at the Montane Trail Head three times (Figure 6). Just over 200 personal contacts were made with passersby and trail users.



**Figure 6. The WSBC Community Coordinator at a trail head demonstrating physical distancing and education.**



## BC Goes Wild

Travel restrictions due to COVID-19 resulted in a significant increase in trail, campground and back country use in the area. 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. WildSafeBC partnered with the Fernie Information Centre to cohost a BC Goes Wild wildlife awareness event which was attended by 40 people.

## Door-to-Door Education and Bin Tagging

Door-to-door education was modified due to COVID-19 restrictions. Over 250 contacts were made with people who reside in areas with wildlife activity. Several visits were made to the Cedars in the spring and fall due to grizzly bear activity. There were several responses to garbage complaints on 4<sup>th</sup> avenue where bears travel from the Elk River then across town towards the golf course. Regular visits were also made to residential areas on the outside perimeter of town and adjacent to parks. There was excellent communication between WildSafeBC, Fernie Bylaw Services and the COS. Education combined with enforcement was required on occasion and was provided by Bylaw Services and the COS.

Garbage tagging was conducted on four evenings the night before garbage collection. Area 1, Maintown, Ridgemont and Castle Mountain was patrolled once and a total of three carts on the curb at night were tagged. A follow up patrol was deemed not necessary in Area 1. Area 2, Alpine Parkland, West Fernie, Annex and Mountainview were patrolled three times. There were 16 carts tagged with garbage out the night before collection over 2 nights and there was only 1 repeat offender.

On October 15, the curbside waste collection schedule was changed to a 7 am start due to an increase in waste and number of pick-ups required. WildSafeBC received a number of calls from residents about garbage being placed on the curb at night in Alpine Parkland because of the 7 am collection time. A third patrol was conducted in Alpine Parkland on November 17 and three carts were on the curb the night before collection. A total of 22 carts were tagged over 4 night patrols and follow up educational materials were delivered to twenty two out of 1,800 residences in Fernie. There was only one repeat offender. Strong compliance in Fernie has indicated the success of this education work to change human behaviour around attractant management. WildSafeBC will continue conversations started with the City of Fernie and Green for Life to change the curbside waste collection schedule.

## Social Media and Press

The WildSafeBC Elk Valley Facebook page grew 61% in 2020 from 595 to 984 page followers and 120 posts. The WildSafeBC Elk Valley website had a total of 120 posts and more than 14,000 views.

The WCC submitted regular articles and was contacted to do several interviews with the Free Press. The wildlife safety clinic hosted by the WCC (Figure 7) 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 in the Free Press and 19 radio interviews.

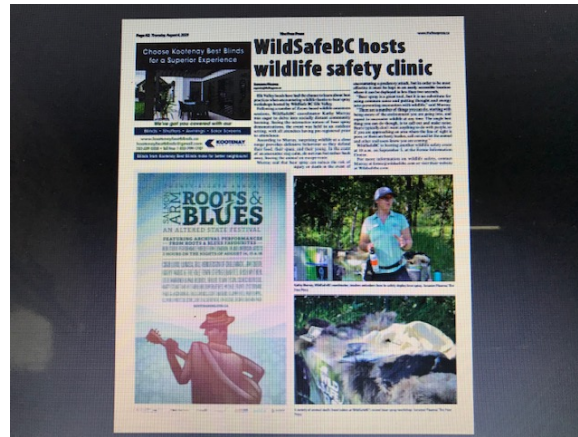


Figure 7. WildSafeBC hosts wildlife safety clinics in the local paper.

## 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 (when seen) 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 or moved to an adjacent strategic location so that people didn't become desensitized to the message.

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 especially during the COVID-19 pandemic when door-to-door education proved to be a challenge.

## Collaborations

The WildSafeBC Program has been very well supported, received and in demand from organizations, visitors and residents in Fernie. 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 Fernie Information Centre. These collaborative efforts proved very successful and resulted in very well attended

events. Parastone, the landowner of the popular Montane and Ridgemont Trail network ensured that our Mountain Biking and Bear Safety Signs were placed at all trail heads and there were regular discussions with the Fernie Trails Alliance to ensure that trail users were educated, carry bear spray and put thought into preventing encounters with wildlife (Figure 8).



Figure 8. WildSafeBC coordinator at the Montane Trail Head with WildSafeBC signage.

## 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's 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 and many other businesses have been taking positive steps forward.

## 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. The Fernie RV Resort, the only campground in Fernie, has the necessary infrastructure, resources and staff training and has taken positive steps forward to support the WildSafeBC Bare Campsite Program (Figure 9).



Figure 9. The bear-resistant food lockers at the Fernie RV Resort and Campground.

## Challenges and Opportunities

The storage of garbage outdoors between collection days and unmanaged fruit trees continue to be a source of attractants that draw wildlife into residential areas. More people in Fernie have created excess garbage and curbside waste collection now starts at 7 am. An increase in garbage on the curb the night before collection has been noted since the schedule change. Fernie is made up of a combination of long-time residents, seasonal workers, second home owners and visitors who all have different levels of understanding and tolerance for wildlife, especially grizzly bears. Innovative educational efforts and collaboration with other community groups and agencies were required to help educate this diverse group of people.

As the City of Fernie continues to grow and develop there will always be new people, new bears, and other wildlife. Black and grizzly bear activity was reported throughout the City of Fernie and the surrounding recreational areas the entire season. There were daily reports of grizzly bears at The Cedars 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 from hikers and campers on Heiko's trail in August resulted in a two week trail closure to protect the bears and the public. An increase in traffic on Highway 3 has also 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 collaboration with community organizations such as: Fernie Trails Alliance, Fernie Mountain Bike Club, Parastone and Montane, Fernie Information Centre, Tourism Fernie, Recreation Sites and Trails BC.
- Continue conversations with the City of Fernie and GFL to change the curbside waste collection schedule.
- 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 businesses through the WildSafeBC Business Pledge.
- Continue progress started with the Bare Campsite Program with the Fernie RV Resort and East Kootenay Parks.
- 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 communication with the Elk Valley Homesteading group to promote the volunteer apple pick program.

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

## Acknowledgements

WildSafeBC Fernie 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 and the City of Fernie. Our community partners have provided invaluable support and guidance. Thank you to: Conservation Officers Patricia Burley, Ryan Gordon, Jeff Piwek, Bylaw Officers Tom Baker and Camille Neal, City of Fernie Staff and Council, Free Press, "The Drive 99.1", "Summit 107", Savage Marketing, Fernie.com, Parastone, Fernie Trails Alliance, Fernie Mountain Bike Club, Wildsight, MAST Program, Tourism Fernie, Fernie Alpine Resort and the Fernie Information Centre and Chamber of Commerce. Thank you to volunteers Emma VanTussonbroeck and Dan Savage.