

WildSafeBC Annual Report 2020

Northern Rockies

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Executive Summary

The WildSafeBC program has been working to prevent human-wildlife conflict in BC through collaboration, education and community solutions since 1998. This year was the third season that the program was delivered in the Northern Rockies Regional Municipality (NRRM). The COVID-19 pandemic meant that delivery was sometimes different, but the WildSafeBC Community Coordinator (WCC) was able to deliver the program safely and effectively.

The NRRM is located in the traditional territory of Treaty 8 and Fort Nelson First Nation and includes the communities of Fort Nelson, and the unincorporated settlements of Toad River, Muncho Lake, Liard River, Tetsa River, Prophet River, and surrounding areas (Figure 1). Efforts were focused on the Fort Nelson townsite which has the highest density of people. In 2020, there were 120 black bear reports; this is lower than 151 calls in 2019. Grizzly bear activity was lower with only six reports compared to 28 in 2019. Garbage remained the most reported attractant followed by fruit trees.

The 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. One zoom webinar was presented to the Fort Nelson Chamber of Commerce and one bear safety and bear spray demonstration was given to the staff at Down to Earth Health Shop. Two bear awareness and safety presentations were given and the WCC was able to set up five display booths over the season. The WCC reached 498 homes through door-to-door education and placed 568 'warning' stickers on garbage bins left on the curb too early or too late.

Both the Conservation Officer Service and the NRRM Fire Rescue (Bylaw) worked collaboratively with WildSafeBC again in 2020 and it is hoped the same level of collaboration will exist in 2021. While there has been no formal resolution from the Mayor and Council, WildSafeBC hopes the NRRM will continue to pursue the Bear Smart Community status which supports our messaging of "keeping wildlife wild and our community safe."



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Cover Photo: Conservation Officer Service, Northern Rockies Bylaw Team, and WildSafeBC Community Coordinator with reinforced bin (credit: Northern Rockies Regional Municipality)

Highlights from the 2020 Season

Wildlife Activity

Reports made to the Conservation Officer Service (COS) through the RAPP line (1-877-952-7277) and through the online form (<https://forms.gov.bc.ca/environment/rapp/>) are available to the public through WildSafeBC's Wildlife Alert Reporting Program (WARP) on the WildSafeBC website. This data is updated daily and this report for the Northern Rockies includes data from January 1, 2016 to October 31, 2020.

There were 120 black bear reports so far this year which is lower than in 2019 but similar to the three year average of 176 (Figure 2). Black bear reports peaked in September when bears enter hyperphagia, a period of intense eating in preparation for hibernation.

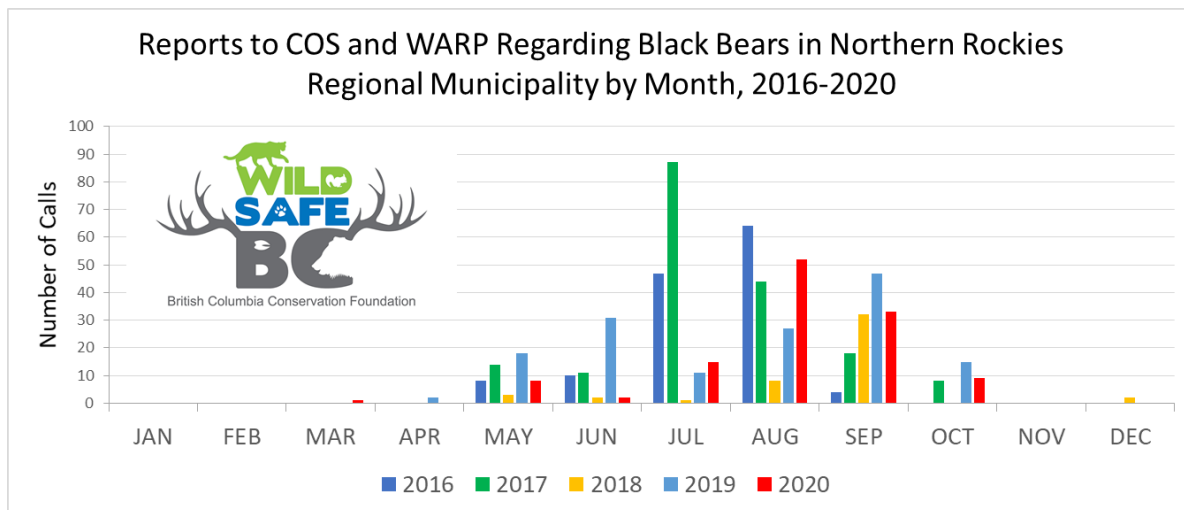


Figure 2. Reports to the COS and WARP regarding black bears from January 1, 2016 to October 31, 2020.

Similarly, grizzly bear activity was lower than in 2019 but on par with other years (Figure 3). Unlike 2019, there were no grizzly bear sightings in close proximity to town.

The number of deer reports have been increasing since 2016 (Figure 3). Many of the reports this year were concerning two adult deer, both with badly injured front legs. They were seen frequently in and around the community, especially during the winter. The WCC has observed an increase in deer within the community, foraging on cedar shrubs and other vegetation.

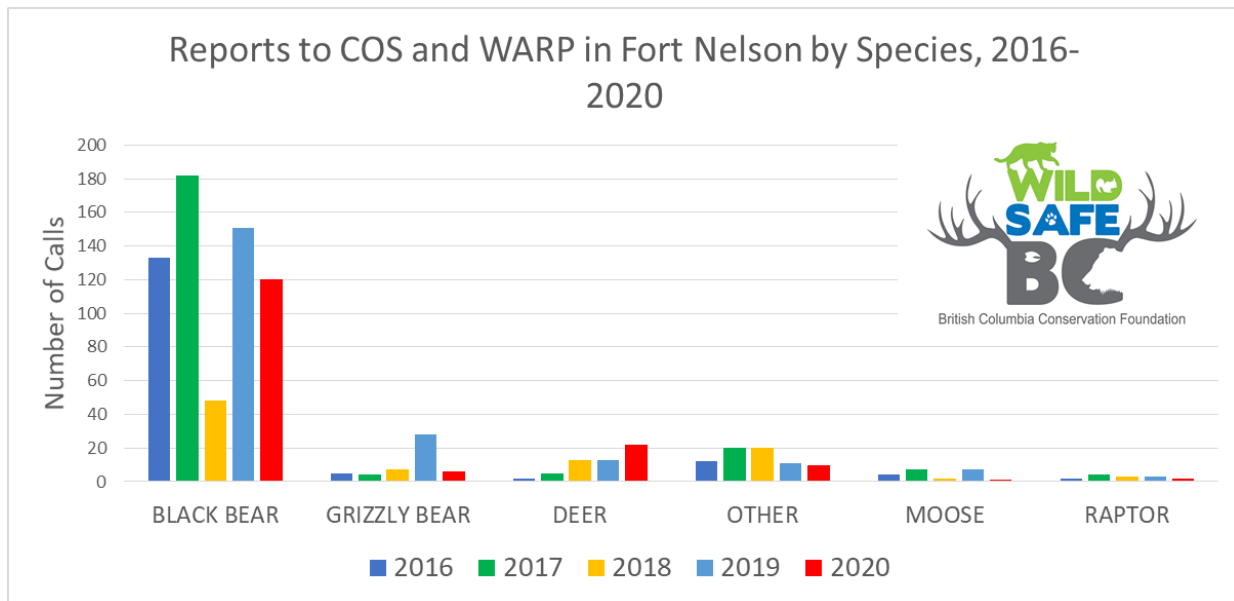


Figure 3. Reports to the COS and WARP by attractant for all species, January 1, 2016 to October 31, 2020.

Garbage remained the most reported attractant for all species (Figure 4). A wet spring and summer may have increased natural food availability and caused bears to be less likely to seek unnatural attractants in town. This may have contributed to the lower number of bear reports in town this year.

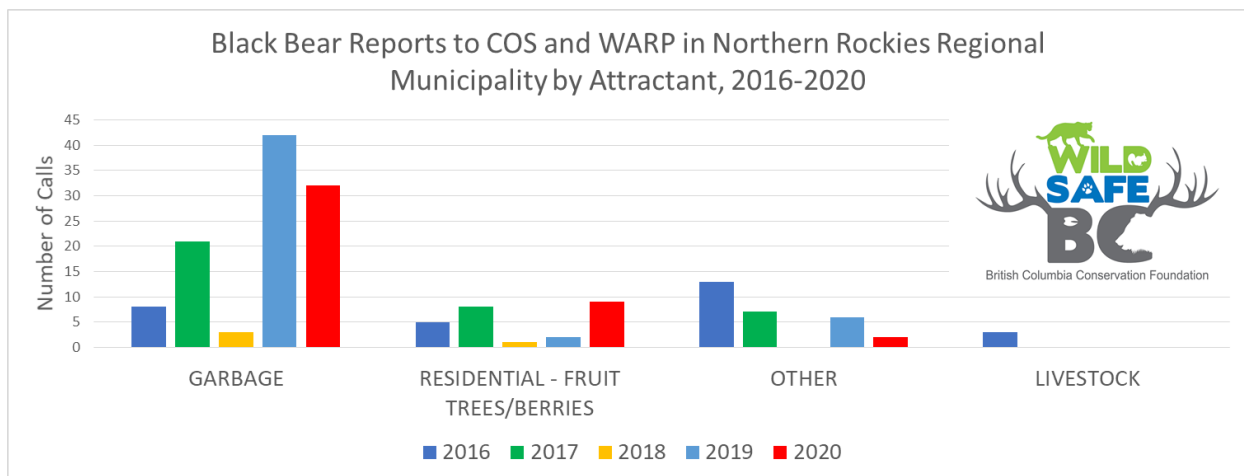


Figure 4. Reports to the COS and WARP by attractant for all species, January 1 2016 to October 31, 2020

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 WCC was required to provide safety plans if 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 WCC worked closely with local communities to ensure that all local requirements and restrictions were respected.

WildSafe Ranger Program

The WildSafe Ranger Program (WRP) introduces youth to the concept of human-wildlife conflict. On November 17, 2020, the WCC delivered a WRP presentation to eleven youth in two groups at the Alliance Church (Figure 5):

Fort Nelson Home Schoolers Grades K - 2 (4)

Fort Nelson Home Schoolers Grades 3 - 6 (7)

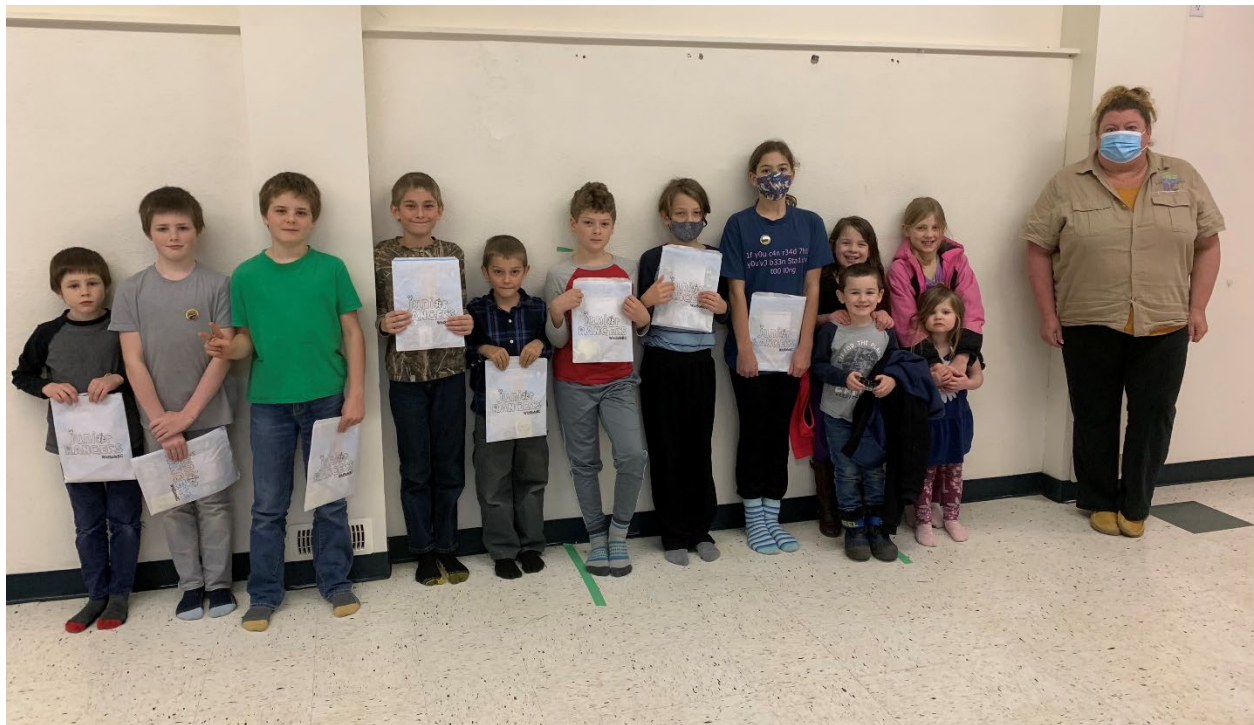


Figure 5. WildSafe Ranger Program presentation for Fort Nelson Home Schoolers.

Presentations to Community Groups

The WCC gave a total of four presentations to a total of 33 attendees through webinars and outdoor presentations (Figure 6):

Down to Earth Health Shop - Bear Spray Demo	(5)
Fort Nelson Community Literacy Society	(4)
Fort Nelson Chamber of Commerce	(7)
Fort Nelson Friendship Center	(17)

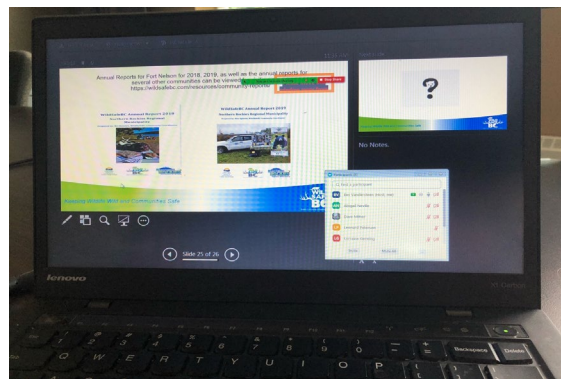


Figure 6. Webinar to the Fort Nelson District Chamber of Commerce

Display Booths

Though several large events were cancelled this year due to COVID-19, display booths were held at popular parks (Figure 7). The WCC set up three display booths and 57 people visited those booths:

Summit Lake (2 booths)	(27)
Millennium Park	(30)



Figure 7. Display booths at Millennium Park (left) and Summit Lake (right).

BC Goes Wild

BC Goes Wild is a campaign to celebrate wildlife in BC and it occurs in September which is typically the month when human-bear conflicts are at their highest in BC. On September 19th, WildSafeBC partnered with the NRRM and set up an outdoor booth at the 2020 Trail Mix Half Marathon and Fun Run. Along with our information booth, there was a kids table where children were encouraged to color or draw a picture for WildSafeBC's 2020 Colouring and Drawing Contest. We also handed out scavenger hunt sheets. There were 50 people that attended the event, and it was so successful that we look forward to partnering with the NRRM again in 2021.

Door-to-Door Education and Bin Tagging

This year, there was an increased focus on door-to-door canvassing (Figure 8). Door-to-door canvassing was completed multiple times during the season and close to 500 houses were visited. The WCC focused on areas that historically had high levels of wildlife conflicts. The WCC reminded homeowners about key information regarding their bins, storage, and curbside pickup. A total of 375 homes were reached via door hangers and 123 people were reached through in person conversations.

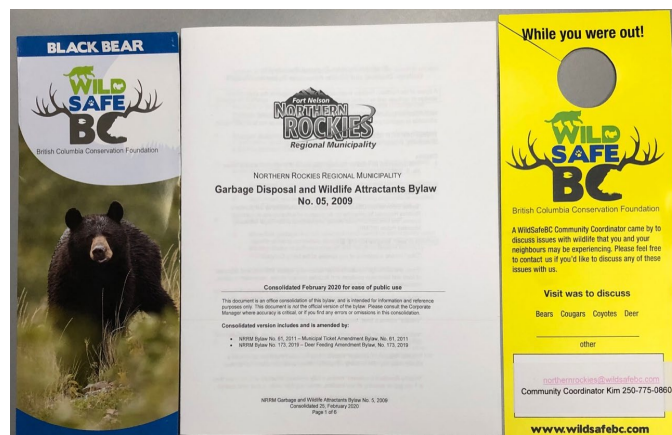


Figure 8. Information packages for door-to-door canvassing

The purpose of garbage tagging is to remind residents that garbage left on the curb is a wildlife attractant. Friendly, bright yellow “warning” stickers are placed on bins that have been put out too early or brought in too late. NRRM bylaw states that bins cannot be placed at the curb prior to 5:00 am the morning of pick up and must be removed from the curb by 7:00 pm the same day. Garbage tagging was conducted between 9:00 pm and 11:00 pm, four days a week over several weeks.

The NRRM was asked that the focus not be on empty bins left out after collection in late August. While empty carts can still be a visual and odourous cue that draws bears into the community, it is the full bins with food rewards that leads to food-conditioning. Food-conditioning is a learned

behaviour where wildlife associate people, and their activities, with a food reward. This can lead in the increased presence of bears in the community and the chance for a negative encounter.

The NRRM has identified areas for improvement in their bylaw and intends to make changes over the winter months. The WCC continued to provide education stickers on those garbage bins that were out too late but enforcement was limited to warnings only and not tickets (fines).

Bin tagging took place from June 1 to October 29th and a total of 568 bins were tagged - 56 for being placed at the curb prior to collection day and 512 for being at the curb after 7pm on collection day (Figure 9, Figure 10). A total of 109 bins were stickered multiple times and required further follow up with the NRRM. This indicates that for 80% of the residences where bins were tagged, there was a changed behaviour of no longer leaving the bins out. It should be noted that weather is an important factor when it comes to leaving bins out. For example, when it was raining or snowing there was a larger number of bins still out on the street. We also saw an increase of bins left out on Thursday evenings if there was a long weekend to follow. The WCC coordinator did notice a spike in garbage placed at the curb too early when daylight hours were becoming more limited.

Overall, we are extremely pleased with the low number of garbage bins being put out too early and for many weeks, we did not tag a single bin on either collection day for early set outs. There are an average of 761 bins that are emptied during garbage pick-up every week. This indicates that most residences are in compliance of the NRRM Bylaw.

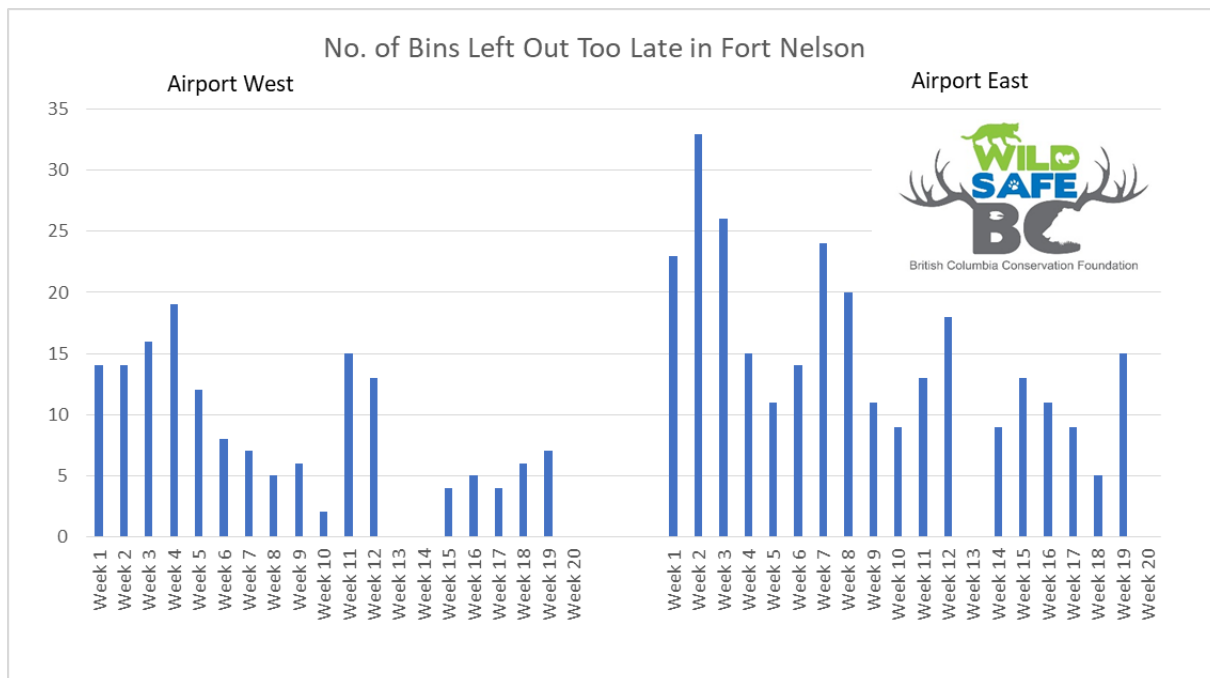


Figure 9. Number of garbage bins tagged for being left out in Fort Nelson after the prescribed time of 7:00 pm (June 1 to October 10 2020)

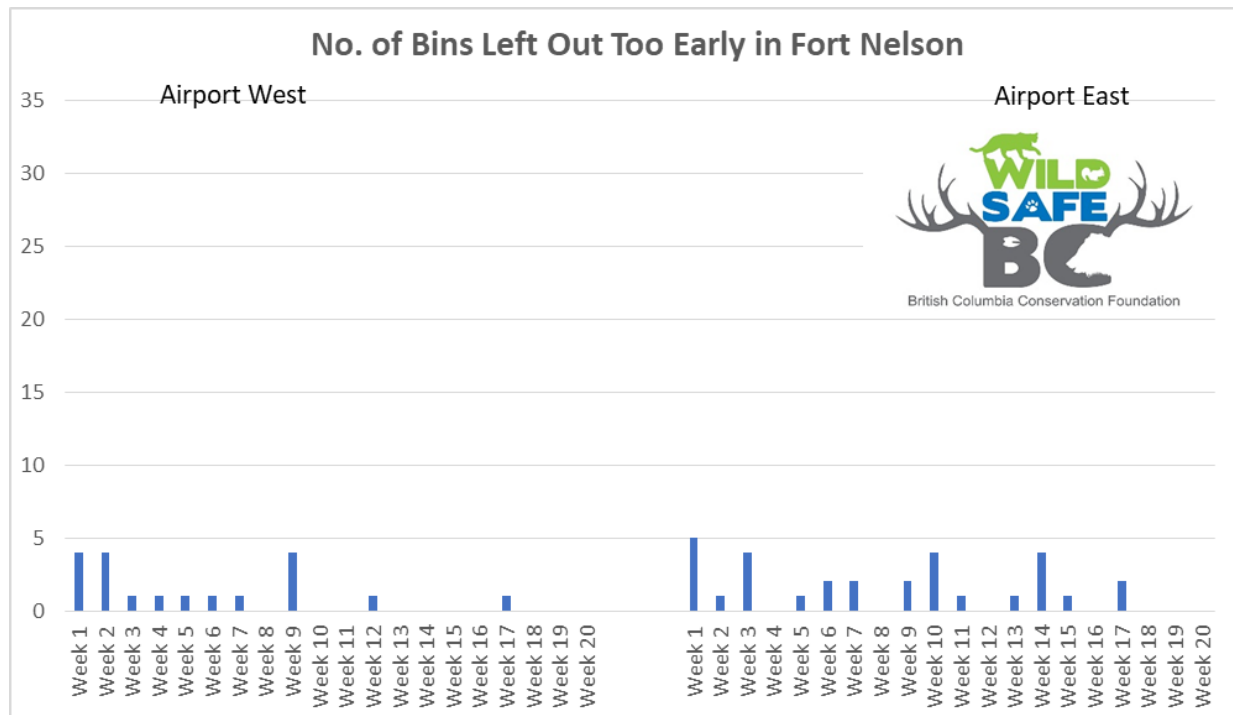


Figure 10. Number of garbage bins tagged for being put out in Fort Nelson prior to collection time of 5:00 am on collection day (June 1 – October 10 2020)

At the request of the NRRM Bylaw team, the WCC also identified 95 bins that were overflowing on the morning of collection from August 31 to October 29, 2020 (Figure 11). These addresses were forwarded to NRRM Bylaw Team for action. Further education is required in this regard.



Figure 11. Overflowing bins on collection day

Social Media and Press

WildSafeBC reached over 16,000 people through the WildSafeBC Fort Nelson Facebook page in 2020. The popularity of the page increased this year from 230 followers at the end of 2019 to 287 followers on September 26th, an increase of 25%. Efforts were made all season to tag the NRRM and the COS in most posts to increase our overall reach. The Fort Nelson News ran an article related to the BC Goes Wild Event.

Wildlife in Area Signs

Two bear in area signs were placed in areas where black bears were frequenting the area.

Collaborations

The WCC continued to strengthen its collaboration with the COS who continued to provide guidance and support. The COS supported WildSafeBC by attending one of our booths. Conservation Officers went bin tagging on two separate evenings in 2020. The WCC also tagged along as the COS did commercial garbage bin inspections as a learning exercise which ties in with the WildSafeBC Business Pledge. The WCC will also continue to direct homeowners with too much fruit to the 'Fort Nelson Ripe for the Picking' Facebook page.

Indigenous Awareness and Engagement

The WCC was scheduled to attend the Fort Nelson First Nation (FNFN) Treaty days in 2020 however, the event was cancelled due to a death within the community and was not rescheduled. A presentation at FNFN Snake River Camp was planned but the dates were changed at the last minute and the WCC was not able to attend. The WCC hosted a presentation at the Fort Nelson Aboriginal Friendship Center in October for 15 kids and 2 adults. The WCC responded to a request for advice about a bear that was accessing garbage on the reserve.

Special Initiatives

At the suggestion of Conservation Officer Clancy in 2019, the WCC worked with Christina Childs to launch a fruit gleaning Facebook page, 'Fort Nelson Ripe for the Picking'. The goal of the page is to match up homeowners with too much fruit on their trees to pick with residents that want/need fruit. Unpicked fruit remaining on residential fruit trees continues to be a problem in the Northern Rockies. While the WCC helped create the Facebook page, the WCC will not be managing it.

In July, after recognizing that many garbage bins had likely never been cleaned out before, the WildSafeBC Northern Rockies program hosted a "Clean Your Bin Contest" (Figure 12). There were 12 official entries and the WCC received many additional messages and emails showing

homeowners cleaning out their bins. Overall, this initiative was a success as it brought attention to the issue and was a good reminder to homeowners to clean out their bins.



Figure 12. Before and after bin cleaning contest.

Challenges and Opportunities

Despite the impact of by COVID-19 mitigation measures, WildSafeBC was able to successfully modify their traditional outreach activities and take advantage of new technologies to continue to deliver their program safely and effectively.

The NRRM encompasses almost 10% of the entire province, roughly 85,000 square kilometers. Approximately 3,000 of the 5,300 people in NRRM reside in Fort Nelson. The WCC focused her efforts on the more densely populated community of Fort Nelson but was able to spend some time at Summit Lake in 2020. The WCC hopes to reach out to the communities of Toad River, Fort Nelson First Nation, and Prophet River First Nation in 2021.

Recruiting volunteers was a challenge again in 2020. Volunteers are needed for safety reasons to aid with garbage tagging as well as door-to-door canvassing. Volunteers are helpful for increasing efficiencies and provide physical help when setting up tents and booth displays. This year, we successfully obtained two volunteers. Additionally, the WCC was supported by the COS and a family member who helped set up a tent for display booths.

Community members continue to prefer to post bear sightings on social media as opposed to reporting sightings to the COS. WildSafeBC urges community members to report sightings early so that they appear on WARP which is readily available to anyone who has internet access. It also provides valuable information for prioritizing areas for door-to-door education and other campaigns.

Garbage was the most reported attractant in the community and resulted in bears wandering along community streets and into people's yards which impacted community safety and enjoyment when spending time outdoors. In an effort to address the improper storage of garbage in the community, the following initiatives are recommended for 2021:

- Continue door-to-door campaigns at the onset of the season in hotspot areas.
- Host a community meeting to bring partners and collaborators together to provide the community with detailed information regarding the combined activities and the desired outcome to promote community participation.
- Continue to gain more followers on the WildSafeBC Fort Nelson Facebook page. Make the WSBC Facebook Fort Nelson page the place where residents can go to seek current, valuable, and factual information.
- Continue to promote the use of WARP and reporting wildlife conflicts to the COS.
- Continue to support the NRRM in working towards Bear Smart Community status.
- Increase human-deer conflict reduction education in a proactive manner in order to avoid the human-deer conflicts reported in other BC communities. Once established, urban deer issues can be very challenging and expensive to resolve.
- Through the WildSafe Business Pledge Program, encourage businesses to adopt practices that will reduce conflict and increased community awareness.

Fruit trees continue to be a source of attractants in the community that draw wildlife into residential areas and which keeps them there for longer periods of time. This impacts the safety of the neighbourhood. Several areas have been identified as hotspots in the community and would benefit from an increased level of education and fruit gleaning activities similar to what we achieved this year. To address the abundance of fruit in the community, the following initiatives are recommended for 2021:

- Electric fence demonstration(s)
- Education campaign focusing on the hazards and solutions through social media, news articles, workshops, flyer in municipal tax information, and door-to-door canvassing.
- Engage food banks and other non-profits.
- Connect residents on Facebook through the "Fort Nelson Ripe for the Picking" page created this year.

Acknowledgements

The WCC would like to thank the NRRM, Ministry of Environment and Climate Change Strategy, and the BC Conservation Foundation (BCCF) for funding this project. Thank you to the COS for their expertise in current and historical wildlife conflicts within the region and for joining the WCC on many activities. The WCC would also like to thank the residents of Fort Nelson for continuing to embrace the WildSafeBC Program. A special thank you to all of the Kamloops BCCF team for their hard work. Their advice, ongoing support, and various skills in communication, budgeting, and organization were appreciated and helped the WildSafeBC Northern Rockies program have a successful and impactful season.