

WildSafeBC Annual Report 2020

Okanagan Westside

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Executive Summary

This report summarizes the activities of the WildSafeBC Okanagan Westside Program between May 1st and November 30th, 2020. This WildSafeBC program area includes the communities of West Kelowna, Westbank First Nation, Peachland, and the Central Okanagan West Electoral Area (Figure 1). We acknowledge this land as the unceded traditional territories of the syilx/Okanagan peoples. This year, black bears continued to be the most reported species to the Conservation Officer Service, with a total of 245 reports (Jan 1-Oct 31, 2020), followed by deer and then coyotes. Unusually this year, the bear conflict peaked in the spring rather than the fall, with 154 reports in June, which is four times the monthly average of the previous four years.

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 physical distancing and other safety measures were in place. The WildSafe Ranger Program was delivered to over 115 students from three different schools and one Girl Guide group, through webinars and outdoor activities. WildSafeBC BC Goes Wild Events provided three wildlife safety themed events, including a bear spray demo, and altogether had 65 attendees. For the family friendly BC Goes Wild Events, the WCC collaborated with Snc̓w̓ips Heritage Museum to make videos that shared knowledge about bears and syilx/Okanagan peoples culture. Through door-to-door education and garbage tagging, 230 and 405 homes, respectively, were directly provided messaging on attractant management. Print, television and social media was also used to deliver bear-in-area alerts, and messaging about local wildlife and attractant management. The Okanagan Westside Facebook page had a large reach and grew in page likes by 69%. The WCC collaborated with five different strata communities, and over 225 households received letters on attractant management. The WCC invested time this season in supporting Bear Smart Community initiatives, and identifying opportunities within the Bear Smart criteria for program sponsors to consider further actions in order to address and prevent human-wildlife conflicts.

Thank you to the British Columbia Conservation Foundation, the BC Ministry of Environment and Climate Change Strategy, the City of West Kelowna, the Westbank First Nation (WFN), the District of Peachland, and the Regional District of Central Okanagan for funding and supporting the program. The WCC sincerely appreciates the commitment of program volunteers and collaborators. Challenges around attractant management, especially in relation to garbage, continue in Okanagan Westside communities. To address this, the WCC will continue WildSafeBC outreach activities and support program sponsors in implementing Bear Smart criteria. Moving forward, these initiatives and partnerships will help “keep wildlife wild and our community safe”.

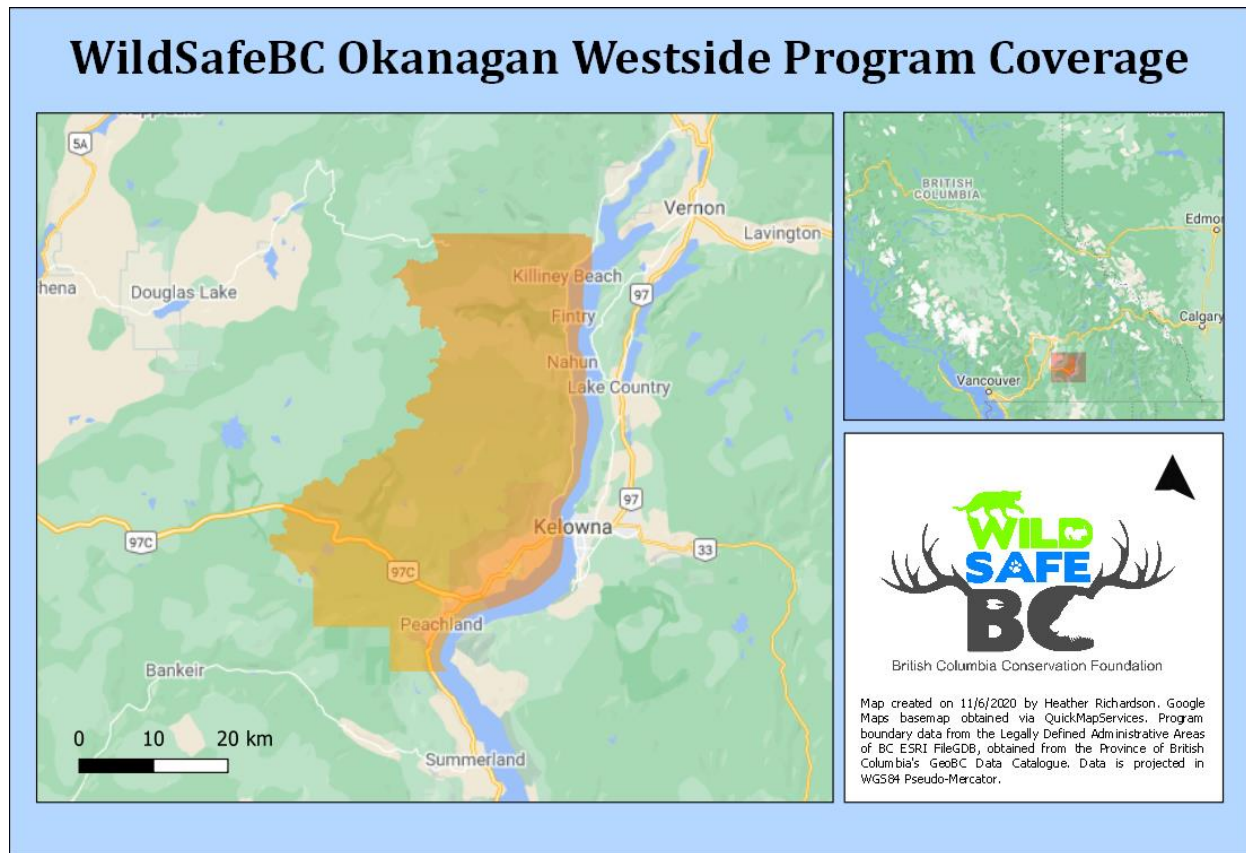


Figure 1. WildSafeBC Okanagan Westside program coverage – West Kelowna, Westbank First Nation, Peachland, Central Okanagan West Electoral Area.

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Cover Photo: Scene from WildSafeBC BC Goes Wild video on bear foods, featuring WildSafeBC Community Coordinator, Meg Bjordal and Sncəwips Heritage Museum staff, Coralee Miller.

Highlights from the 2020 Season

Wildlife Activity

Reports made to the Conservation Officer Service (COS) through the RAPP line (1-877-952-7277) and online form (<https://forms.gov.bc.ca/environment/rapp/>) are available to the public through WildSafeBC's Wildlife Alert Reporting Program (WARP), and uploaded daily. This report includes data from January 1, 2016 to October 31, 2020. Black bears continue to be the most reported species in Okanagan Westside communities, followed by deer and coyotes (Figure 2; Table 1). In these five years evaluated, this year has had the most reports regarding deer, and contributes to an upwards trend in report numbers (Figure 2). In 2020, 86% of the deer reports were regarding injured/distressed, dead or confined deer, and these are likely due to vehicle collisions or getting stuck or injured by human structures such as fences.

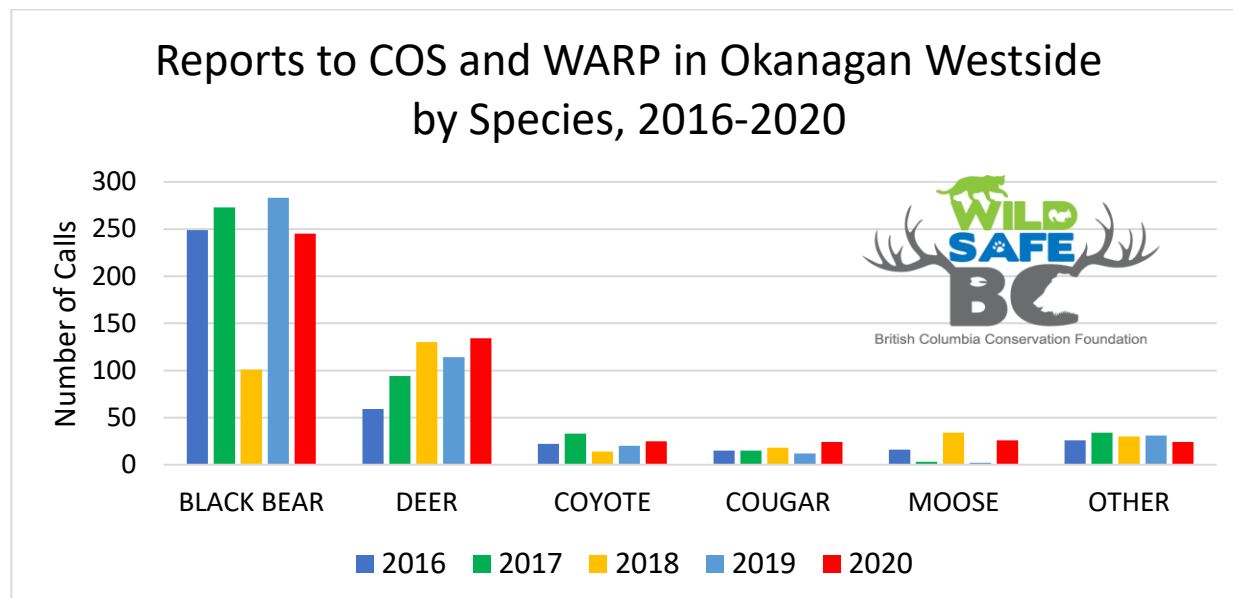


Figure 2. Reports made to the Conservation Officer Service (COS) and WildSafeBC's Wildlife Alert Reporting Program (WARP) by species, from Jan 1, 2016 to Oct 31, 2020.

Table 1. Black bear, deer and coyote reports made to the Conservation Officer Service (COS) and WildSafeBC's Wildlife Alert Reporting Program (WARP) by Okanagan Westside community from January 1 to October 31, 2020. West Kelowna and Westbank First Nation (WFN) are combined due to the way COS records data and the integrated ecology of the two communities.

Species	West Kelowna & WFN	Peachland	Central Okanagan West Electoral Area
Black Bear	213	28	4
Deer	106	26	2
Coyote	23	2	0

In 2020, there have been 245 black bear reports in Okanagan Westside Communities, which is slightly above the average for the previous four years (2016-2019) of 227. It is notable that the total number of reports for this year is close to the average, because the spring had a marked increase in reports, with 154 in the month of June (Figure 3); which is four times the average (2016-2019) of 37 for that month. Meanwhile, on a provincial level, there was an average amount of bear reports. Due to the complex factors that contribute to human-bear conflicts, it is not possible to provide definitive explanations for this large spike in reports during the spring, but factors could include:

- A cold spring making natural forage slow to develop, keeping bears at lower elevations where the communities are;
- Due to COVID-19, more people at home noticing and reporting wildlife in the community;
- Two yearling cubs around the Shannon Lake golf course who were frequently sighted while they were gaining independence from the sow, and had access to a lot of unnatural food sources in surrounding residential areas;
- Population-level factors (both the local Conservation Officers and WCC observed an unusually large number of individual bears in the community, mostly sub-adults, which could be an indicator of a local-level population increase).

Typically the fall is when the highest amount of bear reports occur in Okanagan Westside communities, due to bears entering a period of intense eating, called hyperphagia, in order to prepare for winter denning. However, this fall had a very low amount of reported human-bear conflicts compared to other years. This may be in part to the COS having to destroy approximately nine human-habituated and food conditioned bears from the communities this year. Garbage continues to remain the most reported attractant in Okanagan Westside Communities (Figure 4).

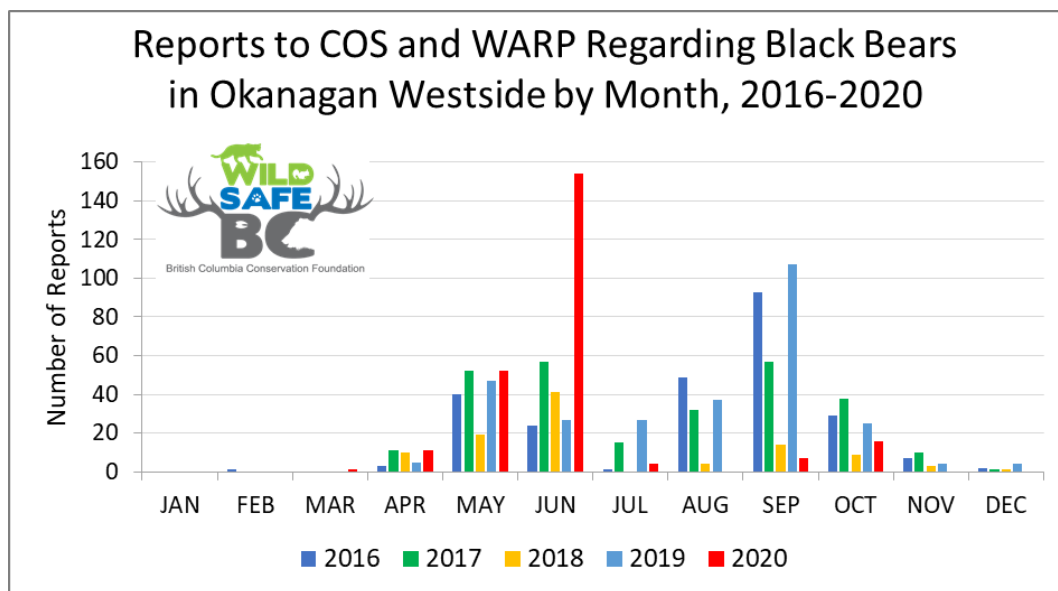


Figure 3. Black bear reports made to the Conservation Officer Service (COS) and WildSafeBC's Wildlife Alert Reporting Program (WARP) by month, in Okanagan Westside communities from January 1, 2016 to October 31, 2020.

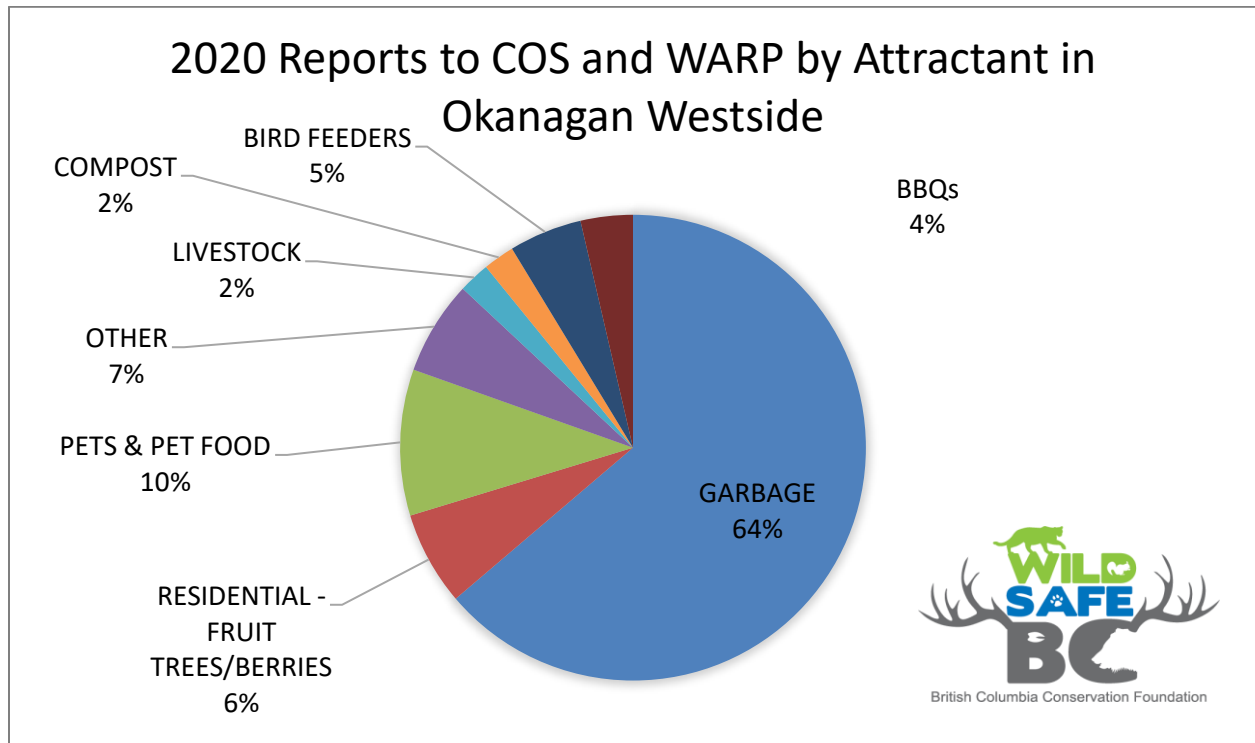


Figure 4. Attractants identified in reports to COS and WARP in the Okanagan Westside from Jan 1 - Oct 31, 2020.

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 three schools and one Girl Guide group participated in the WildSafe Ranger Program through webinars and outdoor presentations that allowed for physical distancing, and 115 students became WildSafe Rangers (Table 2). A total of 78 students received WildSafe Ranger Kits, and the other students received partial WildSafe Ranger kits which included colouring/activity books, bookmarks and brochures. The WCC collaborated with Sncēwips Heritage Museum on the presentations at sēnsisyustēn House of Learning.

Table 2. Schools and groups that received the WildSafe Ranger Program in 2020.

School	Grade	Students
Peachland Girl Guides	Sparks, Brownies	20
Rose Valley Elementary	2, 3	56
sēnsisyustēn House of Learning	1, 2, 3	22
Shannon Lake Elementary	K	17

BC Goes Wild

BC Goes Wild is a campaign to celebrate wildlife in BC and it occurs in September as this is typically the month when human-bear conflicts are at their highest in BC. This year, the WCC hosted two event series, one that was family friendly and the second, with a wildlife safety theme, geared towards adults. For the family friendly series, the WCC collaborated with Sncēwips Heritage Museum to make videos that were posted to our social media pages. The first video featured the WCC walking through the Westbank First Nation Core Community identifying both unnatural and natural bear foods. For the natural plant foods, the WCC explained how bears use the different plants, and a museum staff member talked about traditional cultural uses for the same plants (Cover Photo). For the second and third video, the museum staff shared wildlife related stories of the Okanagan/syilx peoples about respecting wildlife and taking care of the land, wildlife and community (Figure 5). Families were encouraged to participate at home by doing a WildSafe Ranger activity sheet and making their own bear masks! Based on YouTube views and Okanagan Westside Facebook posts reach, the videos were seen 270 times.

Three events were offered over the course of a week for the Wildlife Safety events. Over two weeknight evenings a Wildlife Awareness and Safety Webinar (Figure 6), and a virtual Screening of *Staying Safe in Bear Country*, followed by a Q & A and discussion on bear encounters, were presented and hosted by the WCC. A total of 32 people attended these online events, 16 at each one. The following weekend, three bear spray demos provided training using inert spray for 33 people at Hardy Falls in Peachland (Figure 6). For the bear spray demos, we collaborated with a leader from the hiking club, Hiking Addiction, to offer a short Nature Walk after the demo.



Figure 5: Scene from the *Lazy Boy* video made by Sncwips Heritage Museum.

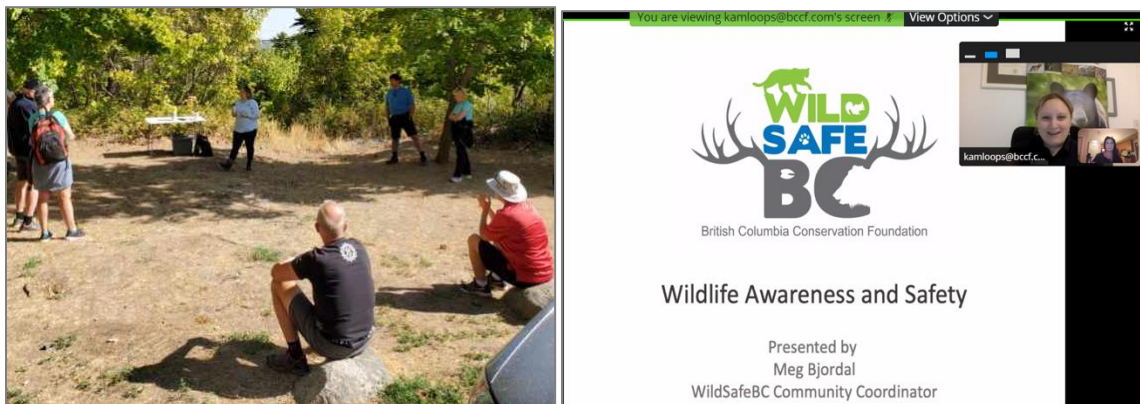


Figure 6. The WCC, Meg Bjordal presenting a socially distanced bear spray demo for BCGW (left) and a Wildlife Awareness and Safety Webinar (right).

Door-to-Door Education and Bin Tagging

Garbage bin tagging consists of placing a highly visible and removable warning sticker on top of carts set curbside the day before collection. Garbage tagging was conducted on nine different nights in West Kelowna and Peachland, with the WCC visiting at least five different neighbourhoods through the Okanagan Westside. A total of 405 garbage carts were observed out on the curb the night before collection day, and they either received an educational sticker reminding residents that garbage placed out early is a wildlife attractant placed on them (Figure

7) or the homeowner was directly spoken with. Three of the garbage tagging routes were repeated on a second date, to measure if residents were responding to the stickers (Figure 8). The results indicate the bin tagging activities were effective in educating most residents, with the Lakeview Heights route showing a 41% reduction in carts placed out early, followed by a 39% reduction in the Shannon Lake route, and a 14% reduction in the Rose Valley route (Figure 8). On a different, but overlapping route in Rose Valley last year there was only a one cart difference between the first and second routes, so 14% is a bigger improvement. However, this area still needs further education considering the high human-bear conflicts that occur every year in the area. On the second pass this season in Rose Valley there were 18 repeat carts out early, 19 in Lakeview Heights and 7 in Shannon Lake. Overall, bin tagging efforts are making a difference in the Okanagan Westside, with a downward trend in the number of bins placed curbside early, when evaluating the same streets or areas that have been visited in multiple years, and in some cases two visits per year (Figure 9).



Figure 7. Bin Tagging in action, in West Kelowna.

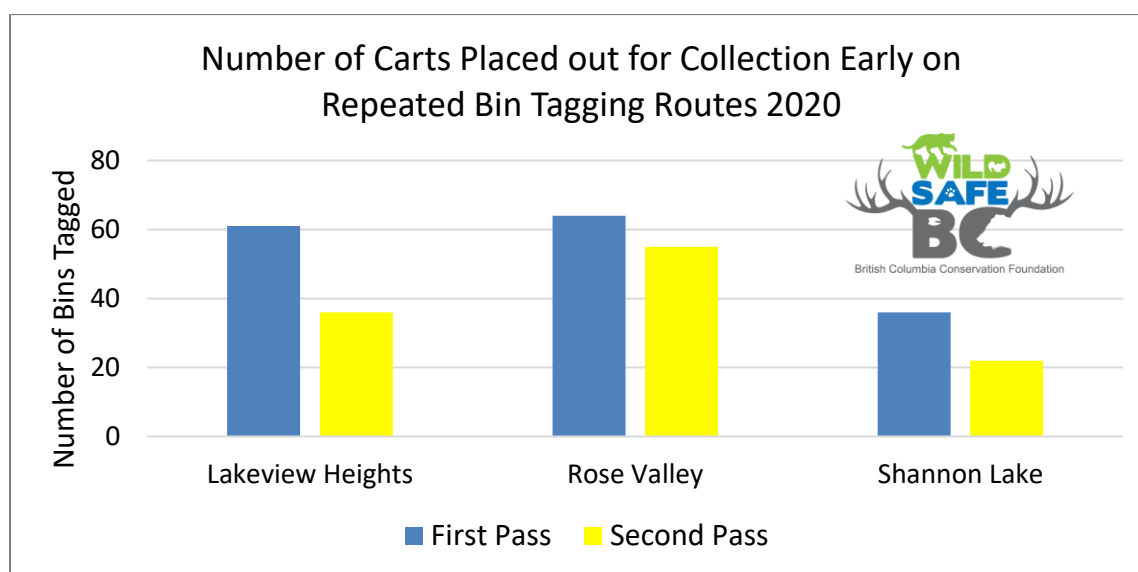


Figure 8. Comparison of repeated West Kelowna bin tagging routes, illustrating the difference in the number of carts placed out the night before collection on the first WildSafeBC pass through the neighbourhood, versus the second.

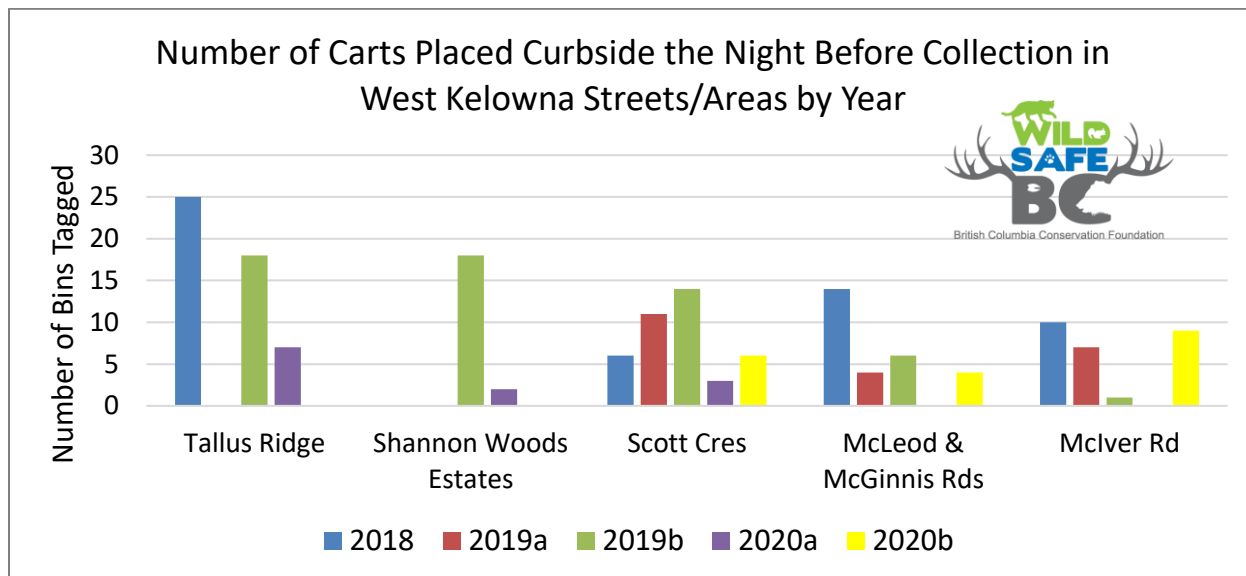


Figure 9. Comparison of streets or areas in West Kelowna that have been Bin Tagged multiple times. An "a" indicates the first visit during that calendar year, and generally occurred the spring/early summer, while a "b" indicates the second visit and generally occurred during late summer/fall.

Door-to-door education was modified this year to consist of leaving door hangers and letters speaking to the human-wildlife conflict occurring in the neighbourhood. In light of COVID-19 concerns and sensitivities, the WCC did not knock on doors as has been done in the past. The following areas were prioritized a result of higher wildlife activity: the West Kelowna neighbourhoods of Rose Valley and Shannon Lake; the Westbank First Nation neighbourhoods of McDougall Creek Estates and Crown Town Estates. A total of 230 homes received letters and WildSafeBC handouts.

Social Media and Press

The WildSafeBC Okanagan Westside Facebook page grew about 69% in 2020 from 328 to 554 page likes, as well as gaining an additional 248 followers. The posts with the highest reach were the ones alerting residents to wildlife in neighbourhoods. The reach on these posts was especially large when the WCC worked with partner organizations to share the posts to their pages. Monitoring of community Facebook pages for neighbourhoods within the program area provided valuable insight on wildlife activity within the neighbourhoods, as activity would often be reported here and not to the COS. These community pages were also good locations to share posts from the Okanagan Westside page to reach more people, and provided an opportunity to address situations in specific neighbourhoods when necessary.

Municipal newsletters were utilized for WildSafeBC messaging. WildSafeBC articles were included in the monthly WFN membership newsletters, sent to around 800 people. WildSafeBC information was also included in the District of Peachland summer and fall newsletters, and in

the summer City of West Kelowna newsletter, which go out to about 2,600 and 13,500 homes respectively.

The WCC was interviewed for several traditional print, online and television news stories (Addendum, Table 3). These stories raised awareness of the challenges with human-wildlife conflict in the area. Topics included bear, deer and cougar safety, attractant management tips, and the unusually high amount of bear reports in the spring.

Wildlife in Area Signs

When bears were confirmed (usually through multiple sightings) to be frequenting a particular area, the WCC requested that the program sponsor place signage in the area to alert residents of the bear and remind them to secure garbage (Figure 10). If the community was short on available signage, the WCC placed laminated signs on community mailboxes to help inform residents of active bears (Figure 10). This season the City of West Kelowna printed additional signs for use when bears were active in multiple areas.



Figure 10. A Bear-in-Area sign in Peachland (left) and Westbank First Nation (right).

Collaborations

The WCC prioritized working with strata communities who were interested in taking steps to address and prevent human-wildlife conflicts. A total of five different strata communities were collaborated with this season, and over 225 households received letters on attractant management from the WCC, distributed by the strata.

The Okanagan Regional Library directly funded three virtual WildSafe Ranger presentations as part of their Summer Reading Club Program. This allowed for 59 participants to learn more about bears, deer, coyotes and other BC wildlife.

Special Initiatives

The WCC invested time this season in supporting Bear Smart Community initiatives. The RDCO is in phase two of a pilot project with bear-resistant bins, with the aim of a wider roll-out, and the WCC provided advice and support to the RDCO on this project, including presenting options for an expanded or additional WildSafeBC program to cover more of the Central Okanagan. The WCC identified and communicated opportunities for Bear Smart initiatives to other program sponsors, with an emphasis on the Bear Smart Community criteria such as the Bear Hazard Assessment (BHA). Additionally, the WCC helped to develop a social science component to BHA process to facilitate more input from the public which will allow for better informed assessments and decisions on addressing human-wildlife conflicts.

Challenges and Opportunities

Challenges around attractant management, largely in relation to garbage, continues for Okanagan Westside communities. Continuation of core WildSafeBC activities, such as door-to-door-education, bin tagging and use of media are essential to address this. Additional actions from program sponsors will be key to making substantial changes in the amount of human-wildlife conflicts in these communities. The public has shared with the WCC, their desire to see further actions from program sponsors. The Bear Smart Community Program provides an excellent framework for sponsors to work within. The WCC should continue to provide support and recommendations for program sponsors interested in further actions to address human wildlife conflicts, which will help “keep wildlife wild and our community safe”.

Other opportunities for next season include launching the new WildSafeBC initiatives such as the Bare Campsite Program (WBCP) and the Business Pledge. The WBCP provides clear guidelines and resources to assist campground operators in maintaining a safe campsite for both people and wildlife. The WildSafe Business Pledge Program has been developed to encourage businesses to be 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.

Additionally, further and ongoing collaboration opportunities exist for the program. The collaboration with Sncēwips Heritage Museum on BCGW events and WildSafe Ranger presentations was highly valued and very successful, and should continue to be explored. There may be opportunities to produce regular videos, and/or incorporate more Traditional Ecological Knowledge into the program. The WFN communications team would also be an asset for these collaborations. Other collaboration opportunities exist with bylaw departments, and if program hours allow, this should continue to be developed.

Acknowledgements

The WCC is grateful for the generous support the WildSafeBC Okanagan Westside program receives from its funders including the British Columbia Conservation Foundation, the BC Ministry of Environment and Climate Change Strategy, the City of West Kelowna, the Westbank First Nation, the District of Peachland and the Regional District of Central Okanagan. Thank you to the talented people within the sponsor organizations who assisted with program support and information sharing.

A big thank you to all the Sncēwips Heritage Museum staff for their collaboration, hard work and enthusiasm on the BCGW videos and school presentations. Thank you to Conservation Officers Murdock, Owens, Seitz, Myroniuk, and Debruin, as well as COS Sergeants Hanratty and Zucchelli for their communications and collaboration. The WCC also thanks the BCCF team for their guidance and help throughout the season. Finally, a special thanks goes out to the invaluable volunteers Dave Calder, Leslie Laird, Lucie Parent, Tom Papi, Christina Borring-Olsen and Ann Graham – without whom the program would not have the success and reach that it does.

Addendum

Table 3. List of media stories the WCC comments were included in during 2020.

Date	Media Outlet Name	Type	Title (click link to read full article)
23/04/2020	Castanet	online article	Bears & WildSafeBC are back
27/04/2020	Black Press	print & online article	WildSafeBC Okanagan Westside to prevent wildlife conflicts with new initiatives
01/05/2020	Westside Post	print article	The bears are back
25/05/2020	Castanet	online article	Bear spotted in Rose Valley
25/05/2020	KelownaNow	online article	At least 1 bear active in Rose Valley area: WildSafeBC
27/05/2020	AM1150	radio	Cougar safety interview
28/05/2020	Castanet	online article	Cougar kills alpaca
03/06/2020	Castanet	online article	Deer attacks woman on trail
03/06/2020	Castanet	online article	Bambi spotted downtown
09/06/2020	Info News	online article	Huge spike in bear sightings reported in West Kelowna area
11/06/2020	Global News	TV & online article	WildSafeBC reporting high levels of bear activity from West Kelowna to Peachland
27/06/2020	Info News	online article	How Kelowna got its name from 'grizzly bear' despite a distinct lack of grizzlies around
02/07/2020	Info News	online article	If you run into one of BC's black bears while hiking, do you know what to do?
04/09/2020	Global News	TV & online article	Okanagan residents warned to be aware as bear sightings predicted to increase
17/09/2020	RDCO	online press release	Take Responsibility for your Trash - Keep Bears Out
28/09/2020	Castanet	online article	Bear reports rise up to 5x
29/09/2020	The Daily Courier	online article	Action urged to curb bear menace in West Kelowna
29/09/2020	Kelowna Capitol News	print & online article	Bear sightings five times more frequent than usual in West Kelowna