

WildSafeBC Annual Report 2021

Bella Coola

Prepared by: Rae Kokeš, WildSafeBC Bella Coola Coordinator



Executive Summary

This report has been compiled to provide an overview of WildSafeBC activities and achievements during the field season from March 1st to November 31st 2021. All activities were undertaken in the Bella Coola valley area within the unceded territory of Nuxalkmc (Figure 1).

This season has seen a notable decrease in reported human-bear conflict incidents compared with previous years and general sightings have also been remarkably low. Shifts in habitat use in response to the province-wide heat dome and abundant wild berry production may have influenced this, along with salmon runs. The destruction of numerous bears in response to conflict incidence over the last two years may also be a contributing factor.

With COVID-19 Provincial and Federal restrictions being lifted, the valley welcomed many national and international tourists during September and October with many tourism facilities operating at a full capacity. The Belarko Bear Viewing Platform opened again to visitors during salmon season and guide-operated river drifts returned, however bear sightings were generally scarce. There is speculation as to whether the heat-dome experienced across BC during the summer resulted in the abundant wild berry crop and influenced bear habitat use during these months and into the fall season.

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. The following summarizes key program deliverables over the course of the season:

- 1 WildSafe Ranger presentation and 13 youth reached
- 6 presentations for 72 participants
- 3 display booths and 94 people reached
- 42 Facebook posts (excluding posts shared from Provincial page) and 191 new Facebook page followers from January 1 to November 30, 2021
- 1 campground participated in Bare Campsite Program and 3 that were contacted

The WCC also focused predominantly on work supporting a new Bear Hazard Assessment and the implementation of a Human-Bear Conflict Management Plan for the program area. The WCC, with support from the Ministry of Forests, Lands, Natural Resource Operations and Rural Development (MFLNRORD) was able to begin a Bear Habitat Use Study to support the Bear Hazard Assessment and gather the area's first baseline dataset regarding the spatio-temporal habitat use of bears. The WCC also undertook a social survey focusing on human-bear interactions, also to further guide the Bear Hazard Assessment, and another first for the community.

With continued funding, WildSafeBC hopes to continue the Bear Habitat Use Study and collaborate directly with the Nuxalk Fish & Wildlife Lab in 2022. Data derived from this study is critical for guiding and adapting human-bear conflict management holistically and provides an incredible opportunity for measuring the effectiveness of implemented conflict reduction strategies in the valley through the Human-Bear Conflict Management Plan. The WCC also plans to continue working with schools with fieldwork excursions and data management. Plans

include creating a citizen science online platform for valley residents to further increase community engagement with WildSafeBC and local fauna.

Moving forward, these initiatives and collaborations will help “keep wildlife wild and our community safe”. We give our respect, gratitude and thanks to the Nuxalkmc, the Smayusta and the Band Council for their continued support and leadership. Stutwiniitscw.

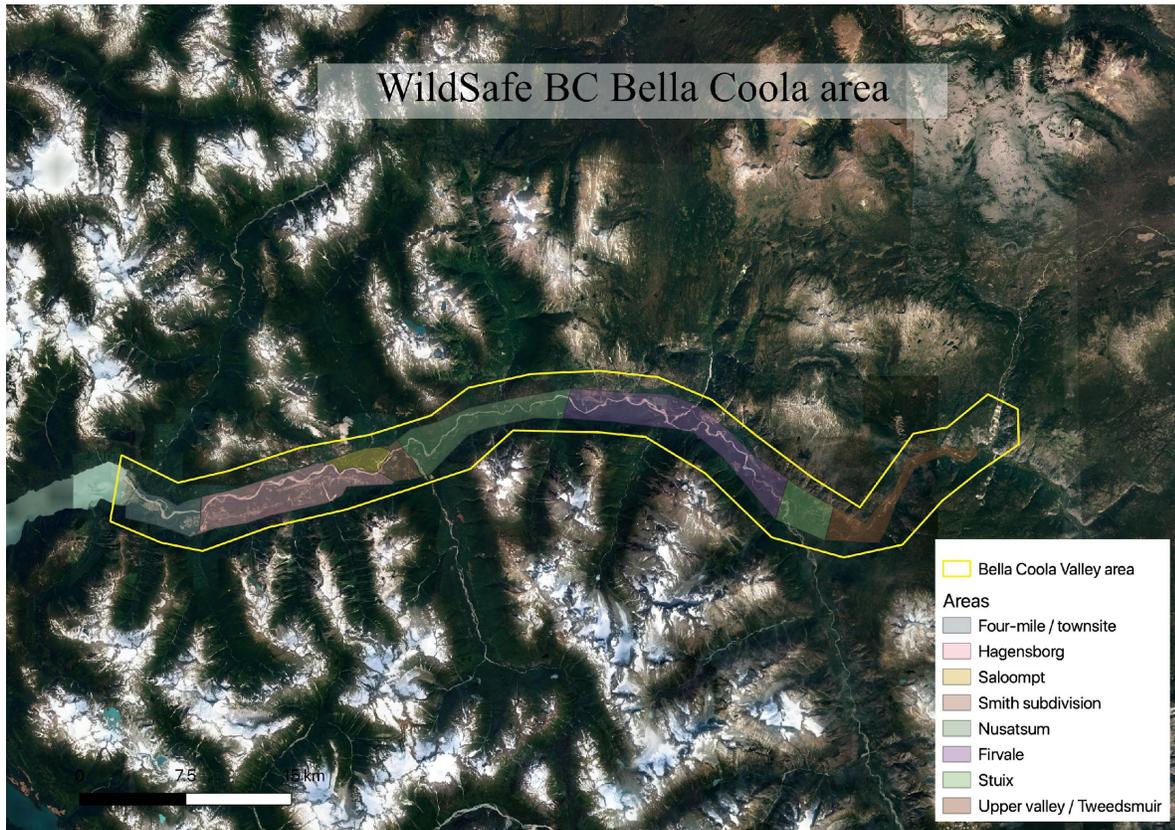


Figure 1. WildSafeBC Bella Coola program coverage area.

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Highlights from the 2021 Season

Wildlife Activity

Reports made to the Conservation Officer Service (COS) through the RAPP line (1-877-952-7277) or online form (<https://forms.gov.bc.ca/environment/rapp/>) are available to the public through WildSafeBC's Wildlife Alert Reporting Program (WARP). This data is updated daily and this report for Bella Coola includes data from January 1, 2021 to October 31, 2021 (Figure 2). Overall reports for all species were notably lower in 2021 compared with previous seasons (Figure 2).

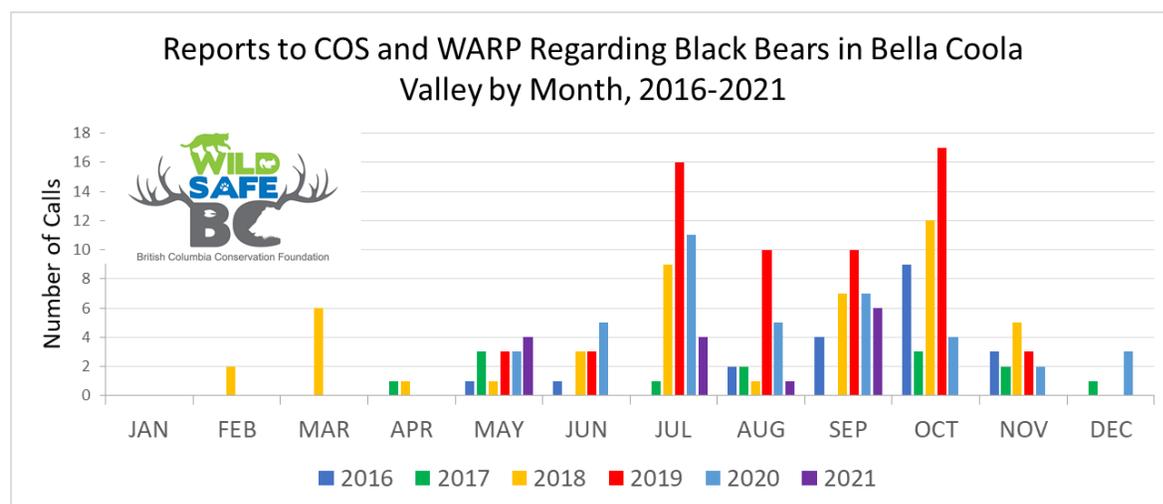


Figure 2. Reports to the COS and WARP by species from January 1, 2016 to October 31, 2021.

There were 26 grizzly bear reports and 15 black bear reports this season. This is the second lowest year for black and grizzly bear with 2017 being the lowest year on record since 2016 when the program began in the area (Figure 3 & 4).

The arrival of a new CO to replace the previous officer may also have impacted calls whereby many residents appeared unaware of there being an active CO in the valley (based on WCCs conversations with residents). The social survey undertaken investigated whether residents had previously ever called the RAPP line to report conflict incidence. Only 31% of respondents said they had and this may reflect under representation of conflict reports in Bella Coola.

Historically, fruit trees have been a strong attractant for both grizzly and black bears. In 2021, most reports did not identify an attractant. When an attractant was indicated, it most often fell under "other" for black bears (n=4) (Figure 4) and "residential fruit trees" for grizzly bears (n=3)(Figure 5).

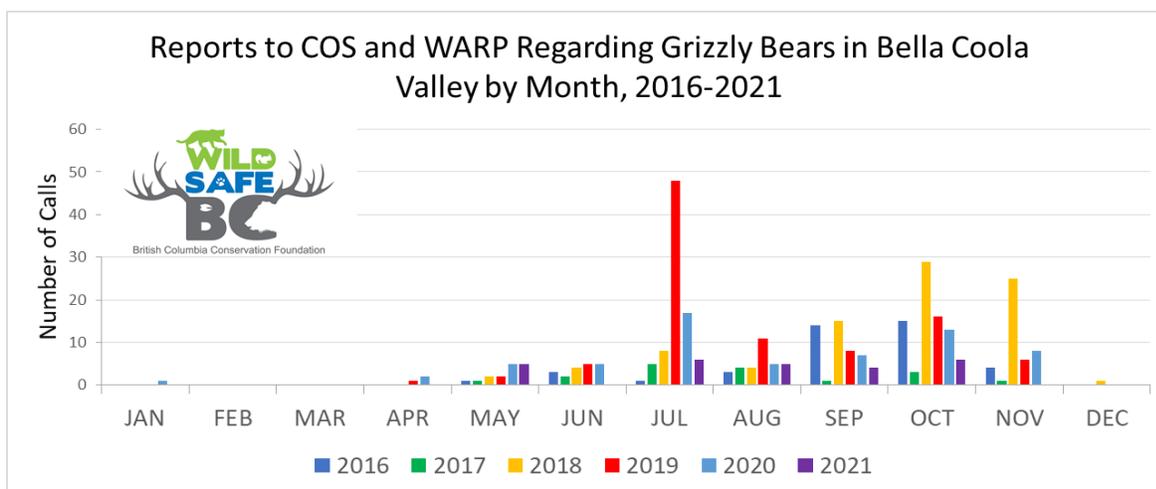


Figure 3. Reports to COS and WARP of grizzly bear conflicts by month.

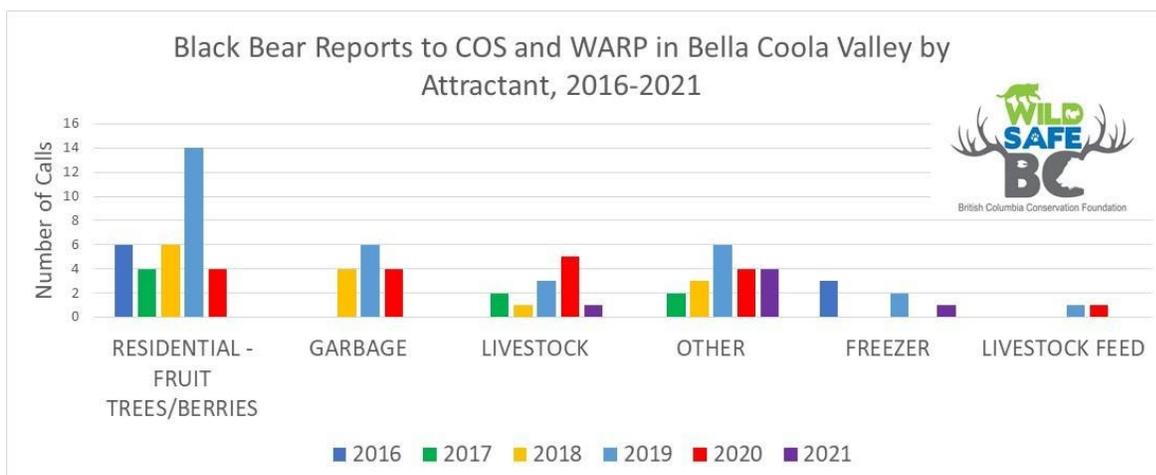


Figure 4. Reports to COS and WARP of black bear conflicts by attractants.

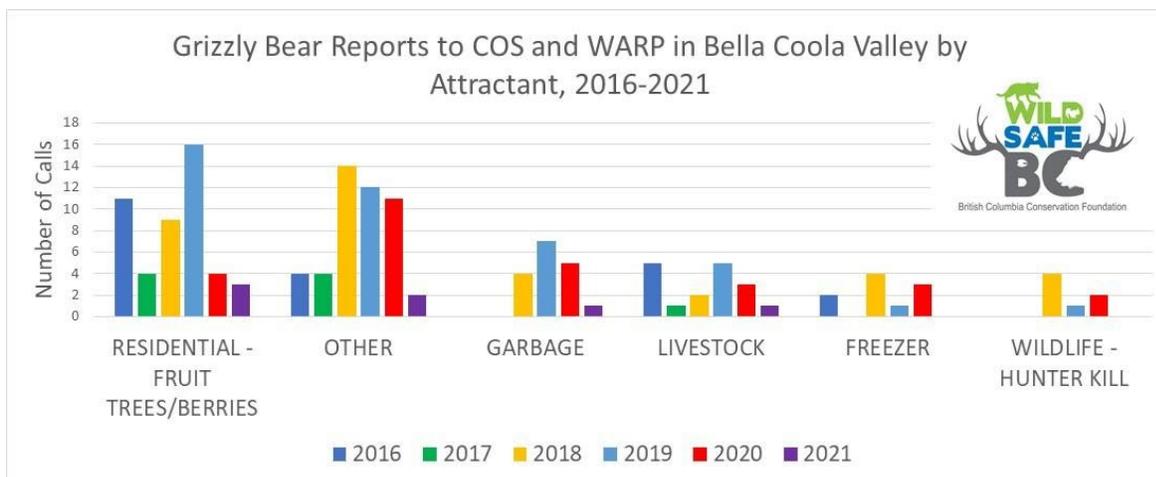


Figure 5. Reports to COS and WARP of grizzly bear conflicts by attractant.

WildSafe Ranger Program

The WildSafe Ranger Program (WRP) introduces youth to the concept of human-wildlife conflict. This season the Acwsalcta School participated in the WRP through an indoor presentation that allowed for physical distancing. A total of 13 students became WildSafe Rangers and received kits.

Presentations to Community Groups

The WCC gave a total of 6 presentations through indoor and outdoor presentations to over 72 participants (Table 1). Bear spray workshops are well-received in the valley as it provides a safe opportunity to practice and become proficient discharging bear spray using inert spray which has no active ingredient (Figure 6).

Table 1. Presentations given during the 2021 season.

Group/Organization	Presentation	Date	Attendees
Sir Alexander Mackenzie Secondary School	Career talk	7-Jun-21	14
Farmers Market	Bear Spray Training	15-Aug-21	8
BCParks	Bear Spray Training	31-Aug-21	12
Acwsalcta School	Wildlife ecology & survey talk	19-Sept-21	16
Acwsalcta School	Bear Spray Training	7-Oct-21	12
Nuxalk College	Traditional knowledge & Western science interface	13-Oct-21	10



Figure 6. Bella Coola Valley resident learning how to use bear spray.

Display Booths

The WCC held 3 booths throughout the season that were well-received and helped increase her engagement with the community. Bear spray training was provided at one booth during tourist season while another prompted the social survey and encouraged the public to fill out the survey via paper copies in person. The WCC also took this opportunity to speak with Nuxalk elders in the area while hosting the booth to learn more about traditional ways to coexist with bears.

Table 2. Display booths held during the 2021 season.

Location	Purpose	Date	People reached
Phoenix Cafe	Social survey	11-Jun-21	21
Farmers Market	General promotion	15-Aug-21	31
Farmers Market	General promotion	26-Sept-21	42

Social Media and Press

The WildSafeBC Bella Coola Facebook page increased its followers from 371 to 563 (52%) from January 1 to October 31, 2021. The program and new WCC were also featured in a Coast Mountain News piece advertising the start of the new season:

<https://www.coastmountainnews.com/community/from-the-savannas-of-africa-to-the-bella-coola-valley/>

The WCC was a guest on Nuxalk radio three times with radio hosts Sheldon Tallio and Russel Silwallace where they discussed attractant management, bear ecology and prompted the social survey.

Wildlife in Area Signs

“Bear-In-Area” signs were placed along Hammer Road in May following repeated conflict incident reports of a grizzly bear damaging vehicles. A sign was also placed in the Saloompt Forest Trail / River area following complaints of tourists blocking the road whilst viewing bears fishing.

Collaborations

The WCC worked closely with the Bella Coola Valley Sustainable Agricultural Society (BCVSAS) in helping promote their fruit-gleaning program as a human-bear conflict reduction action for residents. The WCC is also collaborated with Bella Coola Valley Tourism (BCVT) on signage / digital infographics for the valley with information pertaining to bear conservation and ecology. The WCC also provided support to BCVT as they embarked on their own electric fencing cost-share program.

As a member of the Bella Coola Human Bear Safety Committee the WCC is working with other committee members on content for infographics regarding the Bear Hazard Assessment (BHA) and Human-Bear Conflict Management Plan (HBCMP). Also signage and infographics are also being shared with local Nuxalk artist Chazz Mack to provide appropriate, Indigenous artwork for the concerned pieces.

The Nuxalk Fish and Wildlife Lab has been provided with all information and data from the Bear Habitat Use Study and it is hoped further funding from external sources will allow for formal collaboration next year. Data is also planned to be shared with University of Victoria PhD candidate Kate Field to help support her going research in the Artnarko area. Dr Beatrice Frank also provided support to the Bella Coola WCC, alongside other WCC's, for the social survey in survey design and data interpretation. The WCC foster collaboration with the COS by working with the previous CO Steve Hodgson and met with the new CO Mike Trepanier.

WildSafeBC Bare Campsite Program

Through the WildSafeBC Bare Campsite Program, WildSafeBC is able to provide clear guidelines and resources to assist campground operators in maintaining a safe campsite for both people and wildlife. One campsite is working towards completing many of the steps outlined in the WildSafeBC Bare Campsite Program. The WCC presented the information to other campgrounds located within Tweedsmuir Provincial Parks.

Indigenous Awareness and Engagement

The WCC has met with three Hereditary Chiefs to introduce herself and seek permission to undertake fieldwork in their respective Hereditary areas of the valley (Mack, Pootlass and Schooner). The WCC met with Elected Chief Wally Webber when arriving in the valley and has since met with newly Elected Chief Sam Schooner. Jason Moody of Nuxalk Fish and Wildlife Lab and Bernie Elkins – Stewardship Director, are often contacted regarding WildSafeBC activities. The WCC has also been working with Acwsalcta School and their teachers including Nuxalk College students. Previous WCC Sheldon Tallio had kindly introduced the new WCC to key Nuxalk people including elder Joe Mack and his grandson Chazz Mack who is planned to provide artwork for infographics with funding from BCVT. Sheldon has hosted the new WCC on his morning radio show on Nuxalk radio and provided voice-overs of Nuxalk names of local wildlife species for a series of videos shared during Indigenous Peoples Month.

Special Initiatives

In the absence of a local community coordinator in 2020, the WildSafeBC program focused on two initiatives: electric fencing workshops and a cost-share program, and producing a draft BHA and HBCMP.

The electric fence cost share program was supported by the Provincial Coordinator and lead to 8 electric fence installations in the valley. Those installations were reviewed by the WCC this season and were effective in protecting livestock and fruit trees and preventing conflict with

bears in the valley. The increase and acceptance of electric fencing in the Bella Coola Valley has made a substantial difference in reducing conflicts with bears. We are grateful to Taz Dashko and Josh Wulfekotte of Hagensborg (Figure 6) for sharing their experience:

“A big thanks to Bella Coola WildSafeBC. The electric fence cost-sharing program allowed us to upgrade our mellow yellow fence into a more robust 7-wire setup to secure our berries, veggies & fruit trees. We're helping our local wildlife stay safe too by preventing the habituation that can lead to food conditioning. Keeping our bears wild by keeping them out of our garden.”



Figure 7. Electric fence installed with funding support through the 2020 cost-share program funded by the Province.

The BHA and HBCMP work began in 2020 by enlisting the expertise of Grant MacHutchon and with funding from the Province. These draft documents were refined with feedback from many community members including members of the Bella Coola Human Bear Safety Committee. In 2021, with a WCC in place, the draft documents were further refined with the use of a social science survey and ground-truthing of the data. The social science survey ran for 34 days and had 188 respondents. The final draft is under review and will be available in early 2022.

In order to provide baseline data and better inform human-bear conflict reduction strategies, a bear habitat use study is being undertaken with the use of 20 wildlife cameras and with the support of the Nuxalk Fish and Wildlife Lab. This study has also been a great way to engage local students from the Acwsalcta and Sir Alexander Mackenzie Secondary Schools. The plan is to involve the students in checking cameras and data collection and management.

Challenges and Opportunities

Electric fencing has been promoted for many years in the valley and this has led to better coexistence with bears in the valley. In 2020, electric fencing support continued with a fencing workshop (with Grizzly Bear Coexistence Solutions) and through temporary installations using existing loaner materials (in collaboration with BCVSAS). Over the fall and winter of 2020-2021, there were 8 electric fences purchased and later installed with the support of subsidy funding from MFLNRORD. However there is still a need for reliable support for those who are unable to install and / or maintain fencing in the form of an insured, licensed and trained contractor. While this is excellent progress, further electric fencing support and education is required in the valley to insure fences are installed effectively and well-maintained.

The social survey highlighted the existing high level of tolerance for bear amongst community residents and indicates a significant opportunity to expand human-wildlife coexistence efforts.

COVID-19 related impacts prevented the WCC from being able to work with schools during the earlier part of the season. Schools have expressed acute interest in having the WCC give regular talks, presentations and classes including regular work with camera trapping based fieldwork as part of a citizen science effort. However, it can be difficult to maintain momentum with a seasonal program such as WildSafeBC.

WildSafeBC was able to acquire 5 bear-resistant containers for the valley after an inquiry was made by the COS (Figure 8). They remain available to residents or businesses that have no other options to temporarily secure garbage or organics until they can be brought to the transfer station.

WILD SAFE BC
British Columbia Conservation Foundation

Keep Bears Wild and Bella Coola Valley Safe

Garbage Storage Solutions

- For those that cannot secure garbage indoors WildSafeBC is offering BEAR-RESISTANT subsidized carts for purchase.
- These carts are double-walled, rotationally molded, and 64 gallon in size.
- Carts are sold on a first-come, first-served basis. Contact bellacoola@wildsafebc.com

Keeping wildlife wild and communities safe

Figure 8. Bella Coola bear-resistant garbage containers available for purchase through WildSafeBC and in stock in Bella Coola.

Acknowledgements

The WCC would like to acknowledge and thank the following: Sheldon Tallio, Bernie Elkins, Jason Moody, Sam Schooner, Blondie Bundles, Danika Naccarella, Moore's Organic Nursey, Kopas Store, Bella Coola Customs, Bella Coola Sustainable Agricultural Society, Elizabeth Howard, Harvey Thomassen, Bob Lenci, Leah Moody, Steve Hodgeson, Henrik Rassmussen, Ivy Mutiso, John King, Vicki Sahanatien, Kris Everatt, BCParks, Bella Coola Valley Tourism, Tweedsmuir Park Lodge, Sir Alexander Mackenzie Secondary School, COS, Garth Mowat, Shelley Marshall, Mike Badry, Grant MacHutchon, Gillian Saunders, Phoenix Café, Acwsalcta School, Nuxalk College, House of Smayutsa, and the Nuxalk Nation. WildSafeBC is grateful for program funding provided by the Province of BC and for the ongoing support of the BC Conservation Foundation.