

WildSafeBC Annual Report 2021

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 fourth 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 2021, there were 118 black bear reports; this is slightly lower than 120 calls in 2020. Grizzly bear activity was lower with only 2 reports compared to 6 in 2020. While garbage remained the most reported attractant, reports were down in 2021 and there was a noticeable increase in reports regarding 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. Four bear safety and bear spray demonstrations were given to the NRRM staff as well as staff at the Community Literacy Society. Two bear awareness and safety presentations were given and 2 WildSafe Rangers Programs were administered (Grades 8 & 9). The WCC was able to set up four display booths over the season. The WCC reached 499 homes through door-to-door education and placed 128 'warning' stickers on garbage bins left on the curb too early or too late. Concentration in 2021 was on full bins left at the curb too early and overflowing bins at the curb.

The Conservation Officer Service worked collaboratively with WildSafeBC again in 2021. The NRRM Fire Rescue (Bylaw) had capacity issues throughout the season and it is hoped that an increased level of collaboration will exist in 2022 similar to that of 2019 or 2020 levels. 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."

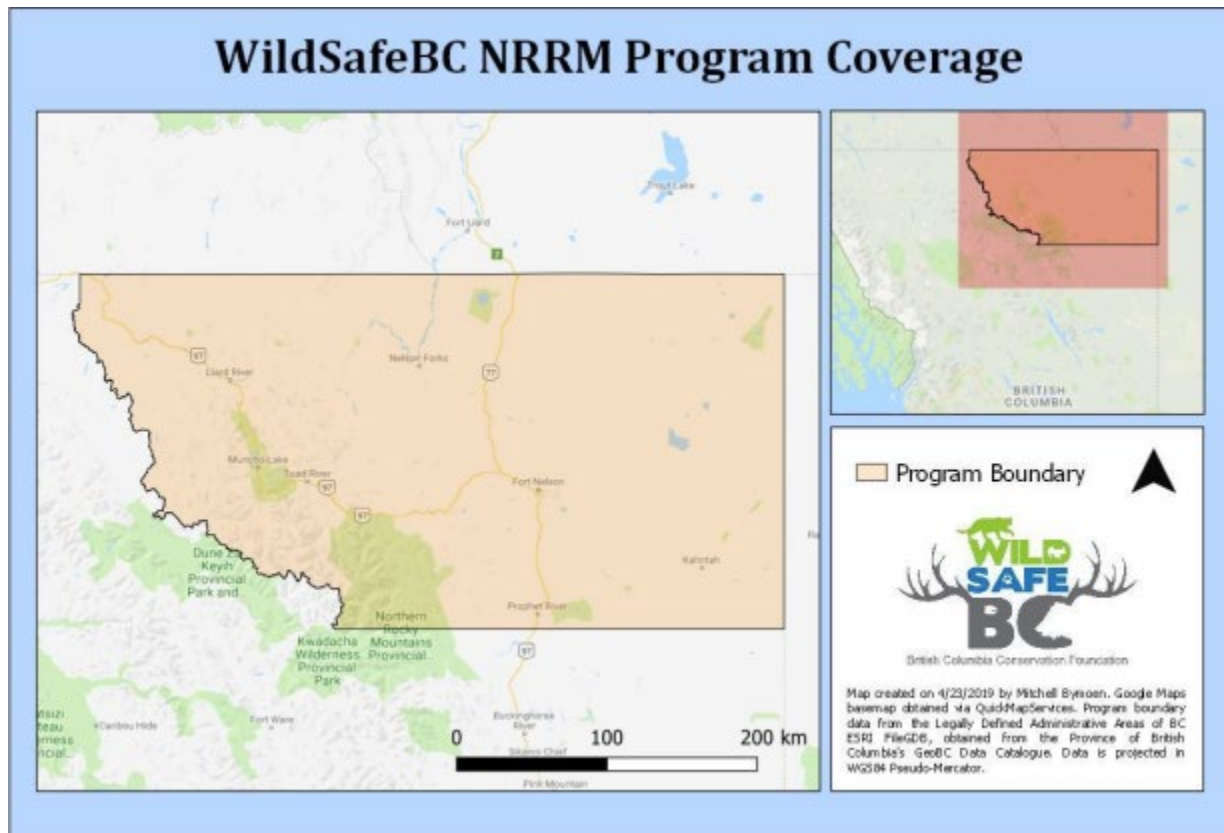


Figure 1. WildSafeBC Northern Rockies program coverage area.

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Cover Photo: Black bear in back yard on Gairdner Crescent eating a Mountain Ash Tree (credit: Myrna Blake)

Highlights from the 2021 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, 2021.

There were 135 black bear reports so far this year which is close to the 5-year average of 127 (Figure 2). Black bear reports peaked in September when bears enter hyperphagia, a period of intense eating in preparation for hibernation.

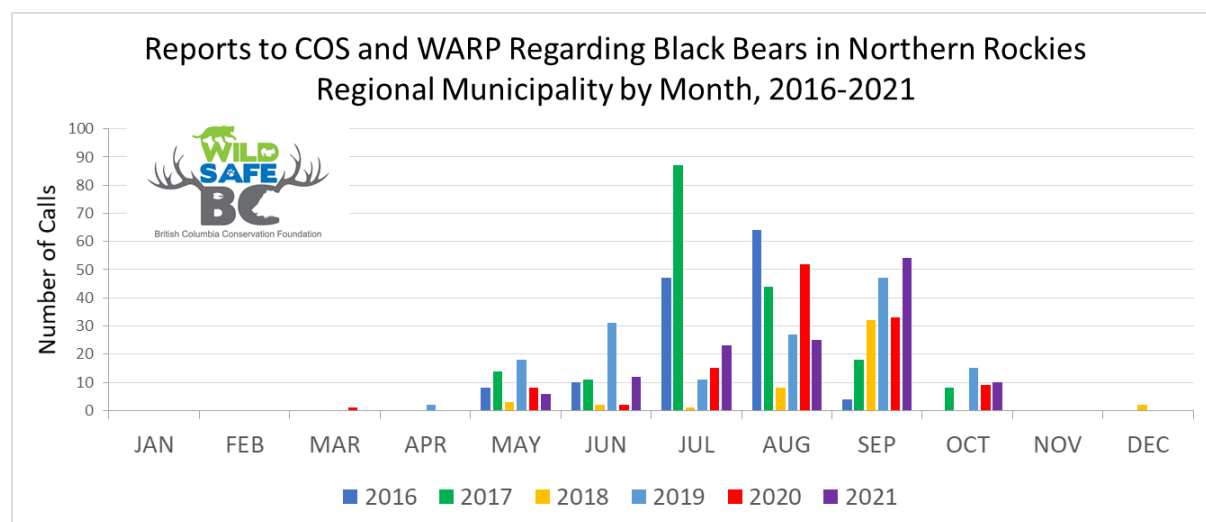


Figure 2. Reports to the COS and WARP regarding black bears from January 1, 2016 to October 31, 2021.

Similarly, grizzly bear activity was lower than in 2020 but on par with other years (Figure 3). There were no grizzly bear sightings in close proximity to town this year.

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.

Garbage remained the most reported attractant for all species (Figure 4). There was a noticeable increase in reports regarding fruit trees. A hot, dry summer may have affected natural food availability, which would explain the increase in reports later in the season. This may have contributed to the lower number of bear reports in town this year as well as improvements made to solid waste management.

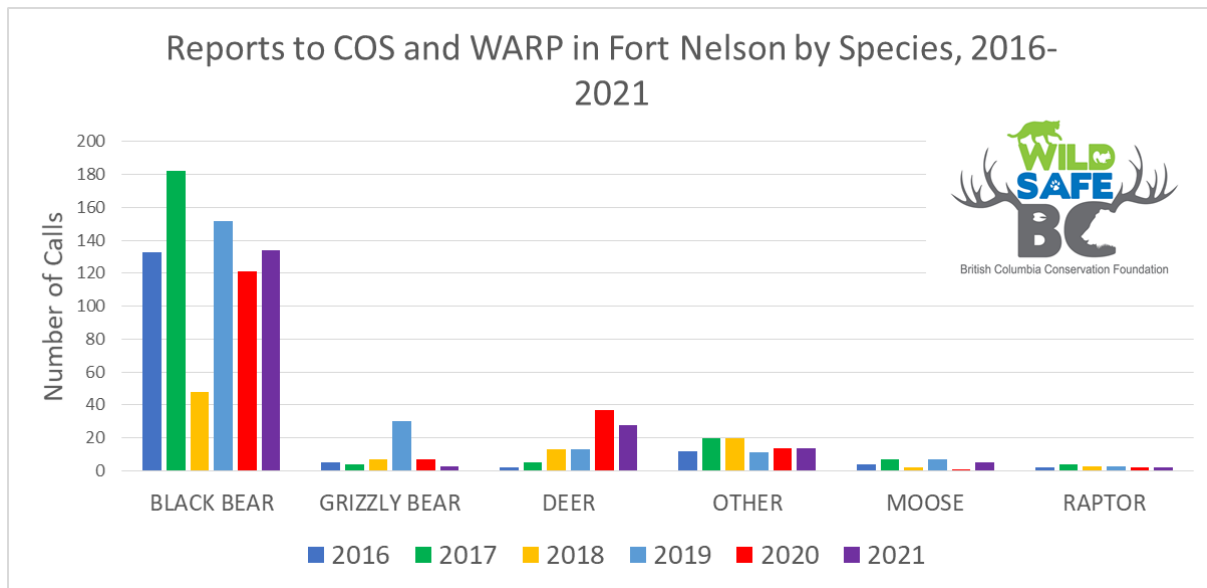


Figure 3. Reports to the COS and WARP by species, January 1, 2016 to October 31, 2021.

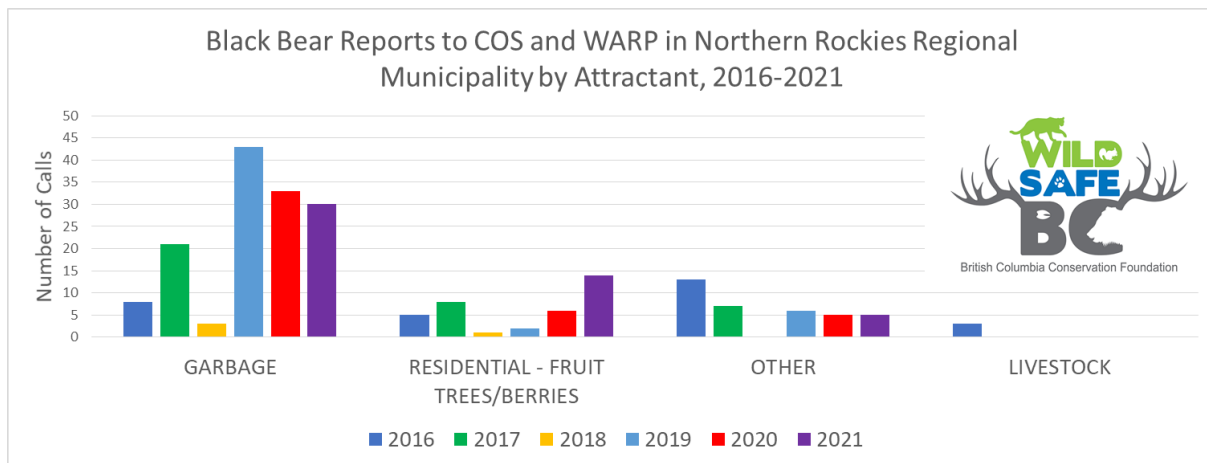


Figure 4. Reports to the COS and WARP by attractant for all species, January 1, 2016 to October 31, 2021.

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. 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. In October of 2021, the WCC delivered 2 WRP presentations to grade 8 and 9 students at FNSS (Figure 5):

FNSS Grade 8 PE (35)
FNSS Grade 9 PE (22)



Figure 5. Presentation to youth at Fort Nelson Secondary School.

Presentations to Community Groups

The WCC gave a total of 8 presentations to a total of 69 attendees (Figure 6):

NRRM - Bear Spray Demo X 2 (12)
FNCLS - Bear Spray Demo (4)
FNCLS - Bear Awareness and Safety (4)
FNSS - Bear Safety & Awareness Grade10 PE (21)
FNSS - Bear Safety and Awareness Grade 11/12 PE (28)



Figure 6. Bear Spray Demonstration NRMM staff.

Display Booths

The WCC set up 4 display booths where 290 people were in attendance (Figure 7):

Farmers Market	(60)
FNFN Culture Days	(50)
Street Festival	(100)
Trail Mix ½ Marathon	(50)
Wilderness Day	(30)



Figure 7. Display booths at Millennium Park (left) and Farmers Market (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 18th, WildSafeBC partnered with the NRRM and set up an outdoor booth at the 2021 Trail Mix Half Marathon and Fun Run. Along with our information booth, there was a kids table where children were encouraged to colour or draw a picture for WildSafeBC's 2021 Colouring and Drawing

Contest. We also handed out scavenger hunt sheets. New this year was our interactive table. There were 50 people that attended the event, and it was so successful that we look forward to partnering with the NRRM again in 2022.

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 over 300 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 178 homes were reached via door hangers and 141 people were reached through in-person conversations. Another 59 homes were visited that had apple trees and the Fruit Gleaning Poster was distributed.

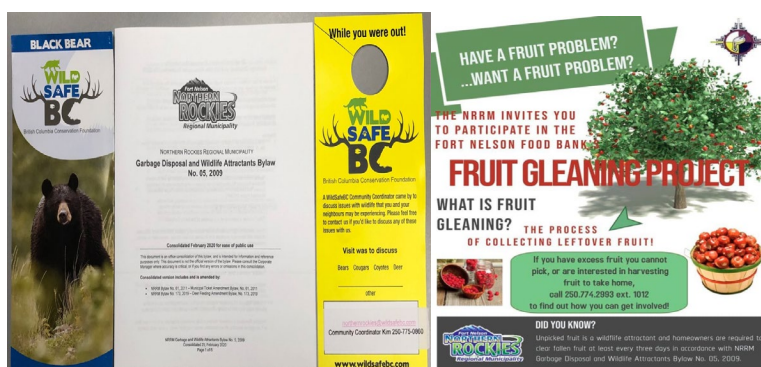


Figure 8. Information packages for door-to-door canvassing.

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. The 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 10:00 pm and 12:00 pm, two days a week over several weeks. A further two days a week were spent identifying overflowing bins.

In June, the focus was on carts set out early with attractants rather than left out late. While empty carts can still be a visual and odorous 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 to an increased presence of bears in the community and the chance for a negative encounter.

In July, August, and September, the WCC provided one random blitz each month for bins out too late and education stickers were placed on those garbage bins. This was followed up by a home visit with educational material. With the exception of one property, no further enforcement actions were taken. The NRRM has identified areas for improvement in their bylaw and intends to make changes over the winter months.

Bin tagging took place from June 1 to October 29th and a total of 138 bins were tagged; 42 for being placed at the curb prior to collection day and 96 for being at the curb after 7pm on collection day (Figure 9, Figure 10). A total of 31 bins were stickered for having repeated the behavior more than once and these required follow up education from the WCC. There were 13 bins that received education stickers three or more times (many were the same properties as 2020) and one of those was forwarded to NRRM for further follow up. While the bin tagging education program is successful in changing behaviours over 85% of the time, some residents are still non-compliant with the NRRM's bylaws.

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. The WCC also noticed bins out on the curb four or five days after pickup. This is why random blitzes were incorporated into the program.

Overall, we are extremely pleased with the low number of garbage bins being put out too early and most days 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 the vast majority of residents are in compliance with the NRRM bylaw.

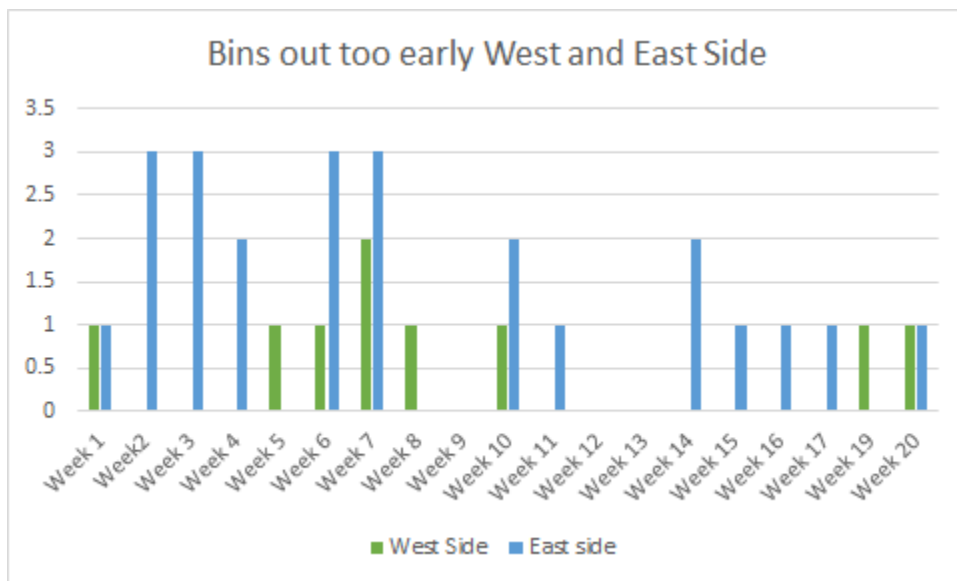


Figure 9. Number of garbage bins tagged for being put out in Fort Nelson prior to collection time of 5:00 am on collection day (June 1 – October 10 2021).

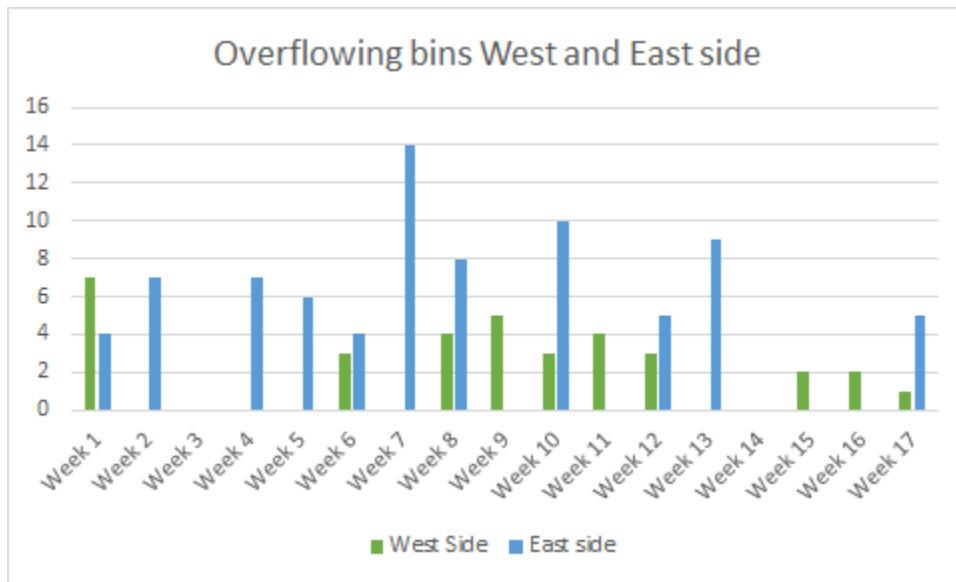


Figure 10. Number of garbage bins overflowing on pick up day (June 21-October 10th).

At the request of the NRRM Bylaw team, the WCC also identified 130 bins that were overflowing on the morning of collection from July 1st to October 29, 2021 (Figure 11). These addresses were followed up by the WCC with educational information. Further education is required in this regard and should be a priority in 2022.



Figure 11. Overflowing bins on collection day.

Social Media and Press

The WildSafeBC Northern Rockies Facebook page grew from 287 followers in January to 362 followers by November, 2021 (growth of 26%). Efforts were made all season to tag the NRRM and the COS in most posts to increase our overall reach.

Collaborations

The WCC continued to strengthen its collaboration with the COS who continued to provide guidance and support. The COS supported WildSafeBC by doing some joint door-to-door canvassing. 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 Aboriginal Friendship Society contact number.

Indigenous Awareness and Engagement

The WCC attended and set up a booth at the Fort Nelson First Nation (FNFN) Treaty days in 2021 however, poor weather affected turnout. The WCC responded to a half dozen requests for advice about bear conflicts at Fort Nelson First Nation which included bears accessing garbage, and a bear causing property damage.

Special Initiatives

At the suggestion of Conservation Officer Clancy in 2019, the WCC worked with Christina Childs to launch a fruit gleanings Facebook page in 2020, 'Fort Nelson Ripe for the Picking'. This year, 2021 the Fort Nelson Aboriginal Friendship Society took over the management and operation of the fruit gleanings group in all aspects. The community's abundance of fruit is now shared with the local food bank. The goal of the initiative is to match 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.

The Fort Nelson Community Literacy Society hosted the first ever Wilderness Day. WildSafeBC attended and approximately 30 people were in attendance. We were able to complete 12 bear spray demonstrations to the general public.

The WCC, in collaboration with the NRRM and the COS, has established a Bear Working Group to work on the criteria outlined in the Bear Smart Community program and to explore solutions that will help reduce human-bear conflicts in the community. The group has met seven times since the beginning of the year and significant progress has been made.

Challenges and Opportunities

Despite continued impacts of COVID-19 mitigation measures, WildSafeBC was able to successfully 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. The WCC hopes to reach out to the communities of Toad River, Fort Nelson First Nation, and Prophet River First Nation in 2022.

Recruiting volunteers was a challenge again in 2021. 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 one volunteer. 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 2022:

- 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 along with the NRRMs Wildlife Encounters website page.
- 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 WildSafeBC Business Pledge Program, encourage businesses to adopt practices that will reduce conflict and increase community awareness.

Fruit trees continue to be a source of attractants in the community that draw wildlife into residential areas 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 increased 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 2022:

- 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.
- Connect residents to the FNAFS - Fruit Gleaning

Acknowledgements

The WCC would like to thank the NRRM, the Province of BC, 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. Susan Walsh, our only volunteer, was instrumental in helping to make this year a success. 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.