

WildSafeBC Annual Report 2022

District of Stewart

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Executive Summary

This report serves to provide an overview of WildSafeBC activities and achievements in the District of Stewart between May 9th and November 30th, 2022. This was a new coverage area for WildSafeBC. The program was delivered within District of Stewart boundaries, including the area between the town of Hyder, Alaska and the Salmon Glacier viewpoint, a popular tourist attraction (Figure 1). WildSafeBC respectfully acknowledges that activities conducted in the program area took place on the traditional lands of the Nisga'a First Nation.

As of 2016, the population of Stewart was 401 residents with an increase during the work and tourist season from May to October, a time when bear activity is at its highest. Directly across the border from Stewart is Hyder Alaska, a town of about 40 residents with some being seasonal. The town of Hyder is only accessible from other parts of Alaska by floatplane, and is bordered by the Tongass National Forest, the U.S' largest national forest, home to the Fish Creek Bear Observation Site. Due to the towns' close proximity to one another, the communities interact often, and Hyder residents are susceptible to the same human-wildlife conflict issues as those living in Stewart, BC.

Wildlife is abundant in the Bear Valley where Stewart is located. However, due to the mountainous terrain and deep snowpack directly around the town, it is not ideal for some species. The main species of wildlife found in and directly around Stewart are bears, both grizzly and black, as well as wolves. The only ungulate present in the area is the mountain goat although there is a healthy population of moose around Meziadin Lake, 60 km east of town. Black bears are the most reported species in the area, followed by grizzly bears.

The WildSafeBC Community Coordinator (WCC) performed outreach activities with the goal of preventing conflict with wildlife in the community. The following summarizes key program deliverables over the course of the season:

- There were 3 community booths and 108 people reached
- There was 1 WildSafe Ranger Program presentation reaching 17 children and 3 staff
- Two business signed up for the WildSafeBC Business Pledge
- 62 door hangers and direct contact with 18 residents
- WildSafeBC Stewart Facebook page gained 50 followers

The WCC also assisted the Program Manager to complete a Bear Hazard Assessment (BHA) as requested by the District of Stewart in order to move forward with their goal of becoming a Bear Smart Community. This is one of six criteria required to gain the Bear Smart Certification.

There were successful collaborations with the District of Stewart, the Stewart Museum and Historical Society, and the US Forest Service, all resulting in establishment of excellent working relationships and an increase in public education and outreach.

Key challenges to the program in 2022 included:

- Lack of bylaws and bylaw officer
- Staff shortages at the District including the Public Works Department
- Staff changes at the District from the time the program was requested to the time of its commencement
- Lack of Conservation Officer presence and subsequent reliance on the RCMP

Thank you to the BC Conservation Foundation, the Province of BC, and the District of Stewart for providing the funding that made this program possible.

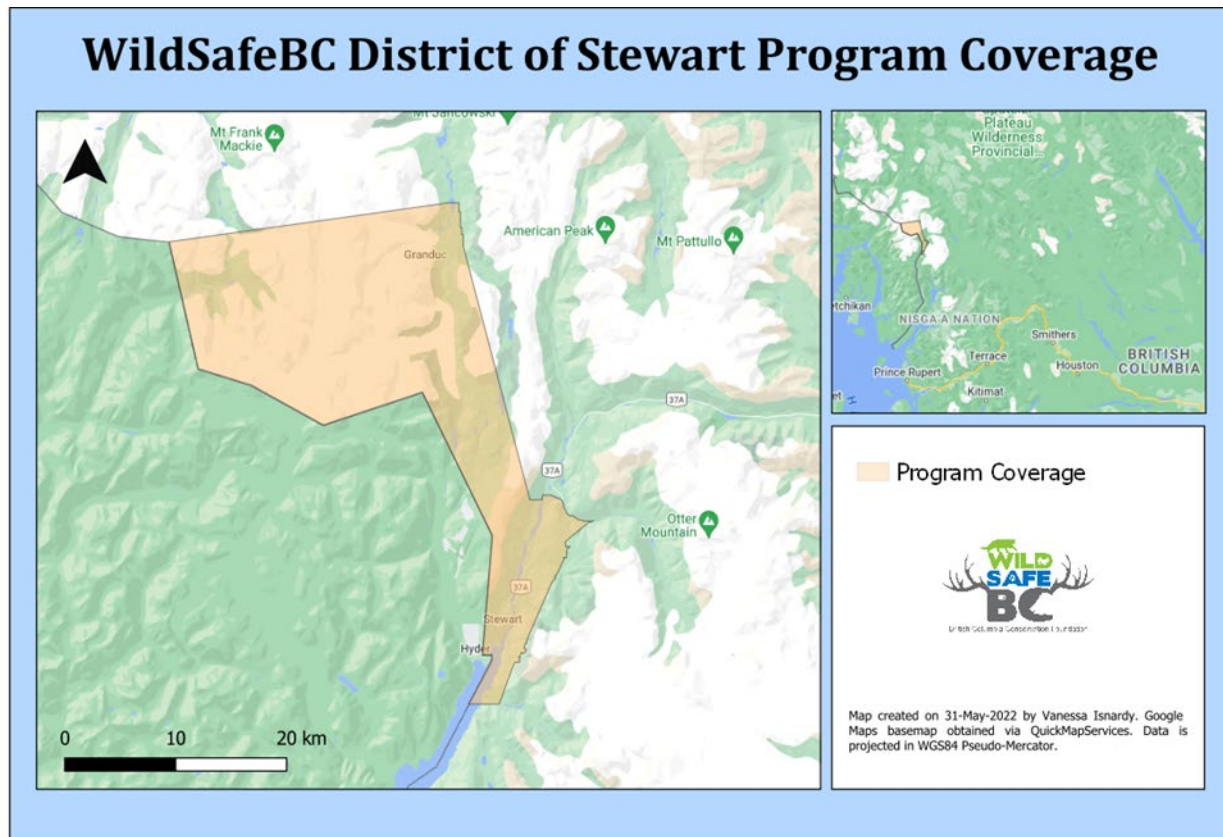


Figure 1. WildSafeBC Stewart Program coverage area.

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Highlights from the 2022 Season

Program Introduction

With funding and support from the BC Conservation Foundation, the Province of BC, and the District of Stewart, the WildSafeBC Stewart Program was able to operate for its first year. The District is situated in prime bear habitat and experiences a high number of human-bear conflicts relative to its small human population. The push to pursue Bear Smart Community status was initiated by a former District staff member, along with the mayor and council at the time, who saw a need for public education and outreach regarding human-wildlife conflict in the area. In the effort to achieve Bear Smart status, the District supported the creation of a new WildSafeBC Community Program and supported a WildSafeBC Community Coordinator (WCC) in the community to introduce the program and help to work towards the Bear Smart community goal.

Wildlife Activity

Calls made to the Conservation Officer Service (COS) through the RAPP line (1-877-952-7277) can be viewed by the public through the WildSafeBC Wildlife Alert Reporting Program, also known as WARP (<https://wildsafebc.com/programs/what-is-warp/>). Due to the lack of COS presence in Stewart, residents mostly report wildlife sightings to the RCMP detachment. The detachment does not keep records of such reports. According to RCMP officers, residents are hesitant to report bear sightings as they do not want the bears to be destroyed and this is probably the case with reports to the COS as well.

Black Bears

Within the District of Stewart, 2014 to 2022, there have been 92 reports to the Conservation Officer Service regarding black bears with an average of 11.7 reports per year (Figure 2).

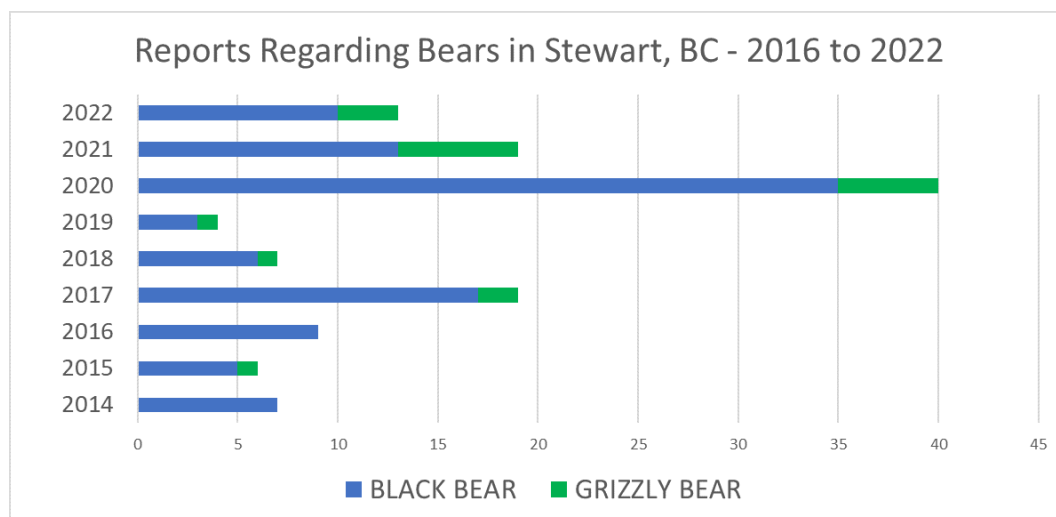


Figure 2. Reports to the Conservation Officer Service regarding black and grizzly bears within the District of Stewart (source: WildSafeBC – Wildlife Alert Reporting Program).

The highest number of reports of black bears were in 2020 (n=35) with a peak in July and October (Figure 3). Many bears were attracted to the downtown core in 2020 as a result of unsecured attractants. As a result, several bears were destroyed.

From 2014 to 2021, the most common encounter type was a sighting (41.0%), followed by food conditioned (25.8%). Garbage was associated with 14.5% of reports (Figure 4) followed by residential – fruit trees/berries at 3.6%. These findings align with feedback from the RCMP.

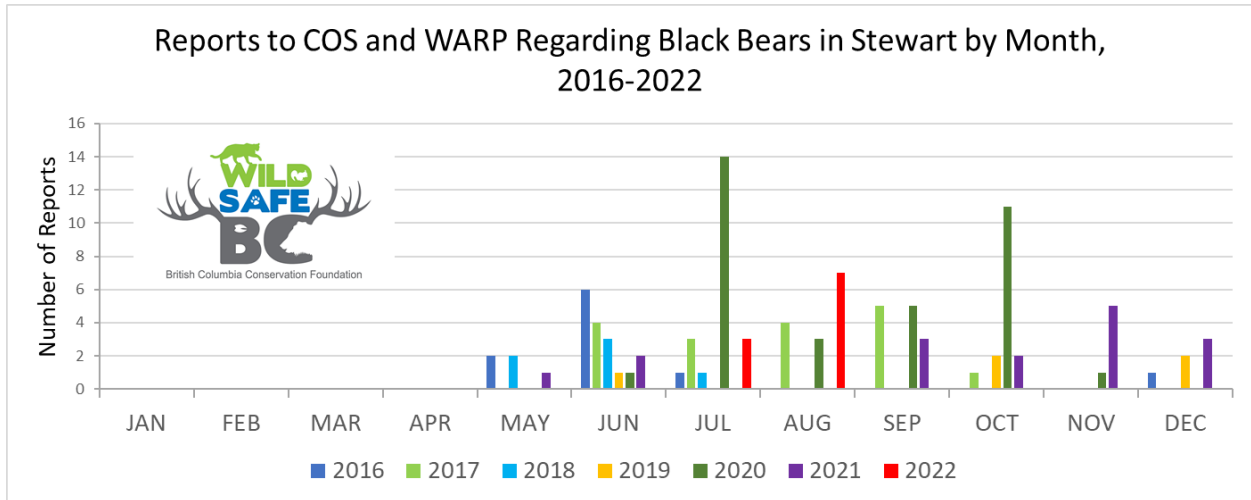


Figure 3. Reports to the Conservation Officer Service regarding black bears within the District of Stewart by month (source: WildSafeBC – Wildlife Alert Reporting Program).



Figure 4. Black bear accessing garbage (left) and black bear sighting (right).

Grizzly Bears

Within the District of Stewart, 2014 to 2022, there have been 18 reports to the Conservation Officer Service regarding grizzly bears with an average of 2.7 reports per year (Figure 2). The highest number of reports of black bears were in 2021 (n=6). From 2014 to 2021, the most common encounter type was a sighting (55.6%), followed by other (25.8%) and injured/distressed (11.1%). Attractants were rarely identified except for once in 2021.

The Fish Creek Observation Site saw 15 to 25 bears this season, a significant increase from years past. This may be attributed to a strong pink salmon return.

WildSafe Ranger Program

The WildSafe Ranger Program (WRP) introduces youth to the concept of human-wildlife conflict. A total of 17 children from Bear Valley School (the only school in Stewart), from kindergarten to grade 4, as well as 3 school staff members and 2 museum staff participated in a program delivered at the Stewart Museum (Figure 5). All the students became WildSafe Rangers and received kits as well as colouring sheets and instructions for entering the WildSafe Ranger Colouring Contest.



Figure 5. WildSafe Ranger Presentation.

Presentations to Community Groups

Although no presentations to community groups were carried out this year, enthusiasm was shown for both the Wildlife Safety Awareness and Bear Spray workshops which will hopefully be conducted next season.

Display Booths

WildSafeBC Stewart participated in two display booths at the Artisan’s Market at the Stewart Boardwalk, as well as one display booth at the Health Fair held at the health centre (Figure 6). All of these outreach efforts were successful, reaching a total of 108 people with both locals and tourists showing interest (Table 1). Both booths at the Artisan’s Market were also attended by U.S Forest Service staff from the Fish Creek Bear Observation Site (see cover photo).

Table 1. WildSafeBC booths in Stewart in 2022.

Public Display Booth Event	Reach	Date
Artisan’s Market	43	Saturday July 2nd
Artisan’s Market	36	Saturday August 6th
Health Fair	29	Wednesday September 21st



Figure 6. Booths at Artisan’s market and health fair.

Door-to-Door Education and Bin Tagging

There were 62 door hangers distributed and 18 conversations had with residents at the time of distribution. The door-to-door canvassing initiative provided residents with key information about certain species of wildlife found in the area as well as how to manage attractants so as not to invite these animals into the neighbourhood.

The District supplies residents with eight bear-resistant community dumpsters placed throughout the community. There is also residential pickup offered once a week although not many residents seem to use this service. Due to this lack of users, bin-tagging was not done this season. The issue of residential garbage collection will be addressed in the Bear Hazard Assessment (BHA) to further determine the need for more focused education efforts in this area.

Social Media and Press

With the support of the District, WildSafeBC Stewart was able to have regular articles in the monthly Stewart Newsletter. This helped to spread the message of reducing human-wildlife conflict as well as to educate the public about wildlife in the area.

A WildSafeBC Stewart Facebook page was started this year and has 50 followers so far. The regular WildSafe BC posts were also shared to the Stewart Community Facebook page, with a positive response from the community. Tourism Stewart has shared many of the pertinent WildSafe Provincial posts as well.

WildSafe Business Pledge

The WildSafe Business Pledge Program has been developed to encourage businesses to set a good example 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 provides ongoing support to the business in the form of staff training, supplying WildSafeBC materials and a WildSafe Business Pledge poster.

Rainey Creek Hardware Store and Cut-Rate Foods have both taken the WildSafe Business Pledge.

WildSafeBC Bare Campsite Program

Through the Bare Campsite Program, WildSafeBC can provide clear guidelines and resources to assist campground operators in maintaining a safe campsite for both people and wildlife.

There are two campgrounds located in Stewart. Bear River RV Park, which is privately-owned, was only open for half the season and is in the midst of a change of ownership and management. Rainey Creek Campground, which is run by the District, had staffing turnover this season. Both campgrounds displayed WildSafeBC brochures and showed interest in the Bare Campsite Program.

Bear Smart Community Program

The Bear Smart Community Program was created in response to annual increases in human-bear conflict across the province of British Columbia. The BC Conservation Officer Service, the Ministry of Environment and Climate Change Strategy, the BC Conservation Foundation, and the Union of British Columbia Municipalities introduced the program in 2002 following the

increase in negative human-bear interactions. The voluntary program encourages communities to become Bear Smart by achieving six criteria that can be done sequentially or concurrently:

1. Prepare a Bear Hazard Assessment (BHA).
2. Prepare a Human-Bear Conflict Management Plan (HBCMP).
3. Revise planning and decision-making documents.
4. Implement a continuing education program.
5. Develop and maintain a bear-resistant waste management system.
6. Implement Bear Smart bylaws.

The program aims to increase safety for the communities living in areas frequented by black bears, as well as reduce or eliminate the need to destroy bears that are accessing human food sources. By addressing the root problems causing conflict and implementing a proactive strategy rather than a reactive one, the number of negative encounters with bears in Bear Smart Communities have steadily decreased. A Bear Hazard Assessment was conducted this season and results will be shared with the District in early 2023. WildSafeBC is grateful to all those who supported our efforts in producing this document.

Collaborations

In addition to the collaborations with the District and Visitor's Centre, WildSafeBC Stewart was able to build solid working relationships with the Stewart Museum and Historical Society, Stewart Community Connections, and the US Forest Service.

A relationship with the local RCMP is developing still as there were anticipated staff changes within the detachment. Overall, the response to collaborating has been positive. The RCMP often act in place of the COS in Stewart as the nearest COS detachment is 330 km away.

Challenges and Opportunities

The main challenges to the WildSafeBC program in 2022 were:

- Lack of known bylaws and bylaw officer
- Lack of COS presence
- Staffing changes and shortages at the DOS
- Staff changes at the RCMP detachment making consistent collaboration difficult.

The key challenges to decreasing human-wildlife conflict in the community are:

- Garbage being stored outside
- Residents resistant to cleaning fruit from trees, specifically apple trees
- Freezers stored outside
- Business owners not having bear-resistant garbage bins/dumpsters
- Many abandoned houses and empty overgrown lots in town that provide cover for bears
- Residents hesitant to report initial bear sightings

With the election of a new mayor and council as well a newly appointed CAO who has shown much enthusiasm for the program already, there are numerous opportunities for the WildSafeBC program to grow in Stewart. With the completion of the BHA and subsequent report, there will be areas identified that can be improved as the District works towards Bear Smart Community status. Some opportunities the WCC would like to see fulfilled next season are:

- Collaboration with the Junior Rangers
- Training for industry staff in the area – contact with Ascot Resources already established
- Events supported by Stewart Community Connections
- Wildlife Awareness and Safety workshops and Bear Spray workshops for the public
- More WildSafe Ranger programs for school children
- Input into Bear Smart bylaws
- Formation of a Bear Committee

Acknowledgements

The WCC would like to thank the District of Stewart, the Province of BC, and the BC Conservation Foundation for their financial support of this program. The WCC would like to thank District staff, Tarra Barker, Sharon Burke and Wanda Decoste, for their patience and kindness. Thank you to Kathy Wang and Jessica Hill at the District for being so easy and fun to collaborate with. Thank you to Stewart Connections for facilitating and welcoming our display booths at numerous community events. Much appreciation to Shirley Rosichuk of the Stewart Historical Society for helping to create and facilitate our WildSafe Rangers program and to Jack Fillion for lending out his animal artifacts for WildSafeBC presentations and workshops. Thanks to Jane Bunn for recruiting WildSafeBC to have a display booth at the Health Fair and to RCMP Constables Marty Richard and Trevor Handford for keeping me up to date on the bear activity in Stewart. Finally, thank you to all the community members of Stewart for their support in WildSafeBC's Stewart inaugural year!