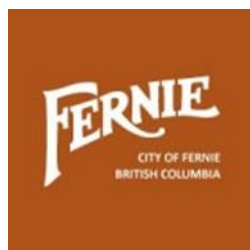
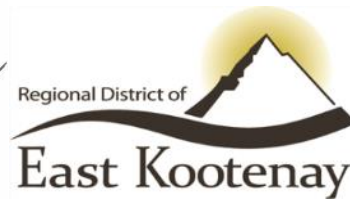


WildSafeBC Annual Report 2023

Fernie Elk Valley South Country

Prepared by: Deanna Haycock

WildSafeBC Fernie Elk Valley South Country Coordinator



Executive Summary

This report describes the activities of two separate WildSafeBC community programs which are co-managed as the WildSafeBC Fernie Elk Valley South Country (FEVSC) Program, between May 15th and November 30th, 2023. The Fernie program area covers the City of Fernie, and the Elk Valley South Country Program covers the rest of areas A and B of the Regional District of the East Kootenays (RDEK), including the communities of Sparwood and Elkford (Figure 1).

Collaboration with community groups and generous support from sponsors and community officials enabled WildSafeBC to reach a broad range of people, engaging them in a variety of program activities. In the time since WildSafeBC (formerly Bear Aware) was established in the region, the program has expanded to engage people through a variety of activities intersecting the tourism, education, policy and civic sectors.

The WildSafeBC Community Coordinator (WCC) performed outreach activities with the goal of preventing human-wildlife in the community. The following summarizes key program deliverables over the course of the 2023 season:

- 777 youth reached through WildSafe Ranger presentations at schools, day care centres, and summer camps in Sparwood and Fernie.
- 13 presentations on a variety of subjects reached 191 participants.
- 12 display booths reached over 1200 people at farmers' markets and community events.
- 150 households in Fernie and 40 in Sparwood reached through door-to-door education.
- 5 bin tagged in Fernie and 44 bins tagged in Sparwood. Garbage bin tagging was expanded to cover all of Sparwood and continued to cover all of Fernie.
- 16 Facebook posts reached 1276 followers and page following increased by 5%
- 4 fruit trees were removed by through the fruit tree removal/replacement program, and several more were removed by the City of Fernie on property they manage

WildSafeBC thanks the BC Conservation Foundation, The Province of British Columbia, The Columbia Basin Trust, the Regional District of East Kootenay, and the City of Fernie for funding the program. WildSafeBC is looking forward to working with residents, visitors, and community groups to help keep wildlife wild and communities safe.

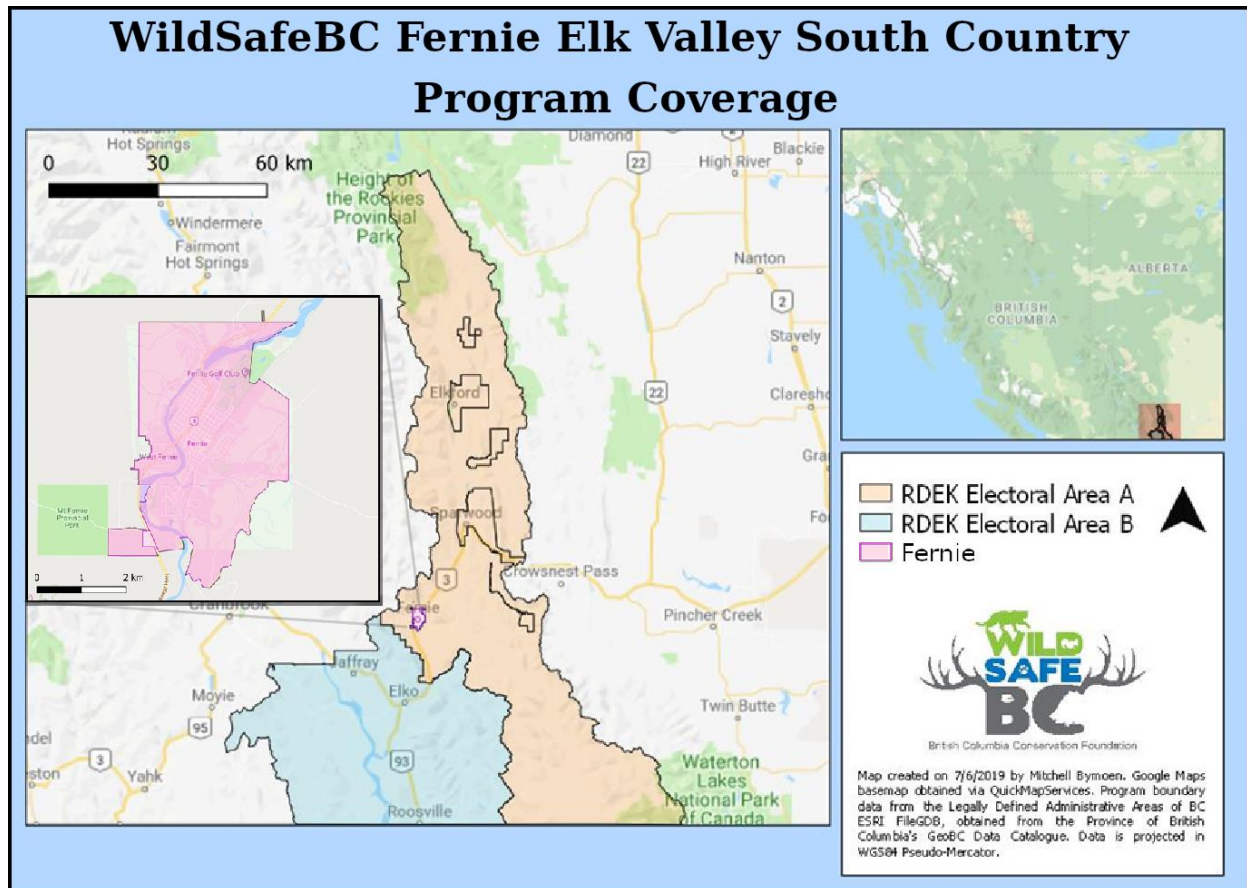


Figure 1. WildSafeBC Fernie Elk Valley South Country Program coverage area.

WildSafeBC Fernie, Elk Valley and South Country Annual Report

2023

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Cover Photo: WildSafeBC FEVSC Display Booth setup.

Highlights from the 2023 Season

WildSafe Ranger Program

The WildSafe Ranger Program (WRP) introduces youth to the concept of human-wildlife conflict through engaging learning activities. Programming reached 777 students from 5 schools and 1 summer camp in Fernie and Sparwood, ranging from Preschool to Grade 9 (Table 1). Presentations for grades 1 through 5 at École Isabella Dicken Elementary School were done in collaboration with Fernie bylaw enforcement, as part of a pilot project developed by Officer Robyn Leach.

Table 1. Schools and preschools that received the WildSafe Ranger Program in 2023.

School or Group	Grade	Students (#)
FAR Kids Mountain Adventure Camp	Age 6-12	22
Fernie Secondary School	8 & 9	27
École Isabella Dicken Elementary School	K to 5	287
Kootenay Discovery School	K to 9	21
Outdoor Connections	Pre-K to 2	41
Frank J Mitchell Elementary	K to 6	379
Total Participants		777

Presentations to Community Groups

WildSafeBC delivered 13 presentations to 191 participants (Table 2) on topics ranging from wildlife ecology, bear spray training (Figure 2), WildSafeBC programming, fruit gleaning, and wildlife safety information. Where possible, presentation materials were tailored to suit the needs of the organization. This was achieved by creating unique materials (such as hand-outs with simplified English for English Language Learner participants) and/or adding relevant details to the base presentation for specific activities/interests.

Table 2. Organizations that received WildSafeBC Wildlife Awareness and Safety education in 2023

Organization	Attendees (#)	Topic
Fernie Alpine Resort - New Staff Orientation	40	Wildlife safety, bear spray
Fernie Academy - Exchange Students	16	BC Wildlife – ecology & safety, coexistence, bear spray
College of the Rockies - MAST Program	12	Bear spray
Columbia Basin Alliance for Literacy - New Arrivals to Fernie	11	Wildlife safety, coexistence, bear spray
College of the Rockies - CORE Hunter Safety Course	10	Wildlife safety for hunters, bear spray
Teck - Communities of Interest Advisory Initiative	21	Fruit tree management programs in the Elk Valley

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Fernie Family Safety Day - Bear Spray Demos	21	Bear spray
Wapiti Playschool - Staff Training	7	Wildlife safety, teaching safety to children, bear spray
Yellowstone to Yukon Conservation Initiative	20	WSBC program history and implementation
City of Fernie – Staff Training	33	Wildlife safety, bear spray
Total Participants	191	



Figure 2. Bear spray demonstration at Fernie Family Safety Day.

Display Booths

From June to September, the WCC held 12 WildSafeBC booths at farmers' markets and other community events engaging over 1,200 people (Table 3). This number reflects a count of individuals who stopped to read the displayed information, took outreach materials like brochures or children's activities, or engaged in conversation. For markets, a new combination of display materials, activities and biofacts were selected each month to reflect the full scope of the program and to help engage repeat visitors. At the Fernie Mountain Market, WildSafeBC coordinated with AmbassadorWILD to share a tent, promote cross-traffic, and collaboratively engage with visitors to offer education across a broader range of topics and perspectives.

Table 3. WildSafeBC Engagement booths in 2023.

Location	Booths (#)	Total Visitors (#)
Jaffray-Baynes Lake Farmers' Market	4	446
Fernie Mountain Market	3	246
Sparwood Farmers' Market	3	199
Sparwood Children's Market (Summer Fest)	1	116
Fernie Family Safety Day	1	204
TOTALS	12	1211

Door-to-Door Education and Bin Tagging

Bin tagging is an educational activity where the WCC places a removable warning sticker on garbage and/or compost bins that have been placed on the curb the night before garbage collection. Residential bin tagging was conducted in October and November the night before each scheduled garbage collection. This year, 5 bins were tagged in Fernie, and 42 in Sparwood (Figure 3). Two areas in Sparwood were surveyed more than once with 2 repeat tags. The effectiveness of garbage tagging for changing behaviour is demonstrated by the 83% of the residents whose bins were tagged during the initial survey (n=12) and then were not found on the curb again during the second survey.

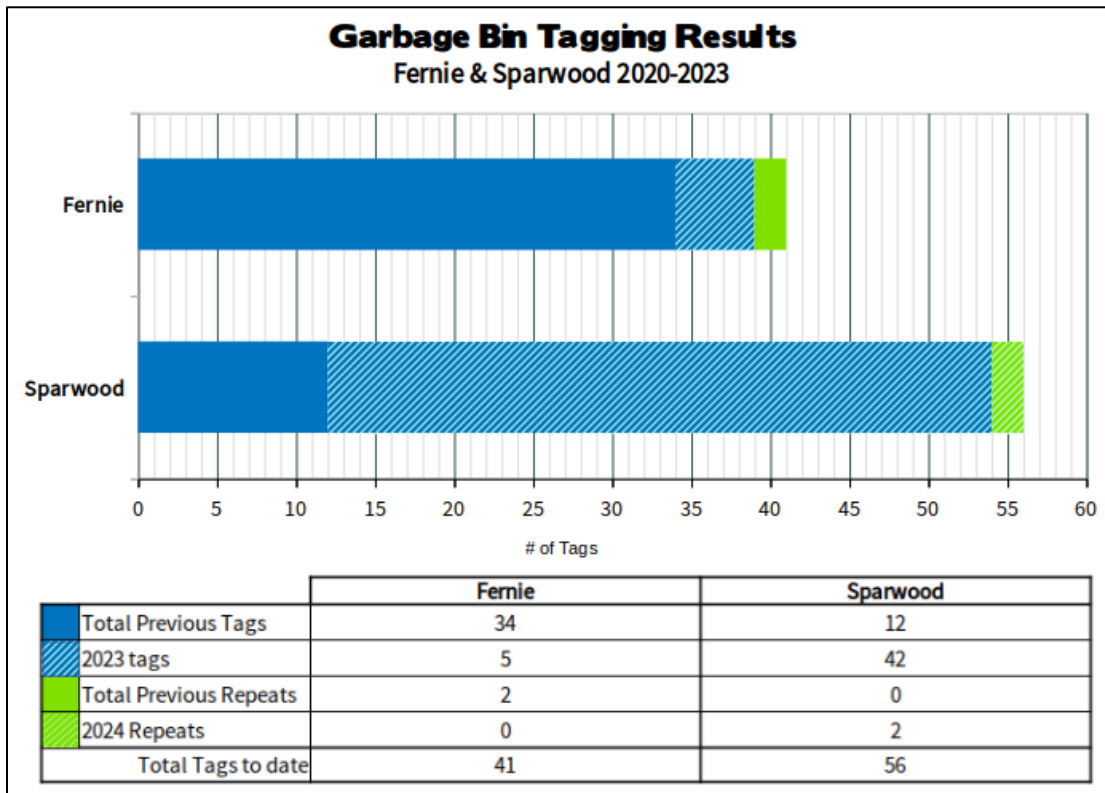


Figure 3. WildSafeBC Community Coordinator Bin Tagging data for Fernie and Sparwood from 2020-2023, showing the tagging numbers of total previous bin tags (2020-2022), the 2023 bins tagged, the previous repeat bin tags (2020-2022), and the 2023 repeat bin tags.

As with previous years, all of Fernie was included for tagging. In Sparwood, tagging was also expanded to cover the whole community. Sparwood residents responded positively to this expansion, with many expressing support for wildlife coexistence and enforcement strategies. Sparwood neighborhoods which were surveyed more than once all had fewer bins tagged the second time, a trend which is reflected in the early Fernie data as well.

This year door-to-door education consisted of sending community-specific letters to residents and was conducted to support bin tagging efforts, plus one instance of warning households in Fernie close to a bear feeding on a carcass. Letters were sent to 150 households in Fernie and 40 in Sparwood to educate residents about the importance of attractant management, inform households of the upcoming bin tagging nights, and provide an opportunity for the public to ask questions or give feedback. Neighborhoods were selected based on feedback from bylaw officers and previous records of noncompliance with municipal waste bylaws through bin tagging data. Feedback received from several residents in Fernie mentioned that 5:00 AM is too early to put bins out, as bears are often still active during that time and bins may not be collected for several hours. Many households also reported not using their curbside bins either seasonally or at all to avoid the hassle.

Business Pledge

The WildSafeBC Business Pledge is an initiative that encourages businesses to adopt wildlife safe practices and publicly recognizes those that do. In Fernie, no new businesses signed up this year, although there may be an opportunity next season to generate renewed interest, especially as commercial waste management continues to be an important issue in the community.

Bare Camping

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. No new campsites were approached or participated in the program this season and this should be prioritized by future WCC's due to the volume of recreational camping and tourism in the area.

Social Media and Press

The community WildSafeBC Facebook saw a modest 5% increase in followers from 1,213 to 1,273. The WCC created 16 posts over the season. Posts that had highest reach are those that mentioned other organizations/pages, with the top performing post reaching more than 370 users. Viewership may be impacted by Meta's recent decision to block all Canadian news content on the platform.

The WCC completed a radio interview with 2dayFM regarding the increase in bear activity for the fall season. Media releases and interviews performed by other WildSafeBC Community Coordinators also had reach in the Fernie, Elk Valley and South Country program area. For example, material provided to local broadcast and print media by the Kimberly Cranbrook program also reaches Fernie, Sparwood, and other nearby communities.

Wildlife in Area Signs

Wildlife in area signs are placed in areas of high wildlife activity or in areas where a conflict with wildlife can occur, such as when an animal is injured, travelling with offspring, habituated or acting aggressively. The public has grown accustomed to seeing wildlife in area signage in and around the communities of Fernie and Sparwood and consistently indicate support for this activity. In the past, meeting the public demand for signage has been a collective effort between the bylaw officers, parks workers, local recreation groups such as the Fernie Trails Alliance, and the WCC. The WCC should continue to connect with municipalities as soon as possible to establish a routine for placing signs.

Collaborations

The WildSafeBC Program has been well supported and well received from organizations, visitors, and residents throughout the Elk Valley and South Country. Over the years, the program has collaborated with many community organizations making the program a success. This season,

connections with Tourism Fernie, AmbassadorWILD, library staff, local biologists, and bylaw services in Sparwood and Fernie enabled WildSafeBC to increase program outreach.

WildSafeBC continued to collaborate with Tourism Fernie this season by providing brochures and educational materials, as well as co-hosting booths at the Fernie Mountain Market with AmbassadorWILD (

Figure 4). Co-hosting effectively increased traffic and created an open flow of ideas, benefitting both groups.



Figure 4. Collaboration with AmbassadorWILD at the Fernie Farmer's Market.

The WCC collaborated with staff at the Fernie Heritage Library and Sparwood Public library to stock brochures and children's activities. The libraries supported the promotion of events online and with posters. Fernie library staff also hosted a WildSafeBC presentation as part of a larger effort by the Columbia Basin Alliance for Literacy to familiarize newcomers to Fernie with local fauna. Libraries provide unique opportunities to not only create access to information, but also to help foster a sense of community.

WildSafeBC also continued to collaborate with a local wildlife biologist this season on a fruit tree removal/replacement cost-share project, which has been well received by the COS and the various districts in the Valley. This program provides support to program area residents and provides cost-share options for fruit tree management. The cost share element of these options is essential to make these programs more accessible.

As in previous years, the working relationship between the WCC and bylaw officers in Fernie and Sparwood allowed for mutual support on various tasks. Officers were instrumental in helping set priorities for the WCC based on the dynamic needs of the community. In Sparwood, redoubled efforts to increase compliance with solid waste legislation was supported by the expansion of bin tagging to more neighborhoods. In Fernie, a pilot project developed by Officer Leach looked at delivering information about the recently updated solid waste bylaw to students alongside WRP content during joint presentations with the WCC. The pilot project greatly increased interest in WRP bookings and was well-received by teachers and students.

Indigenous Awareness and Engagement

The WCC took part in a training course called Working Effectively with Indigenous Peoples, and participated in group discussions about Indigenous engagement as a community coordinator. Building connections with Indigenous peoples should be a focus for future programs in the area, especially those that help maintain contact through staff turnover.

Special Initiatives

This year the WCC continued working with a Provincial wildlife biologist on a Fruit Tree Removal/Replacement Project, which was started in 2021 and is funded separately from the WildSafeBC FEVSC Program through Biodiversity Solutions. Through collaborations with Provincial biologists, Grizzly Bear Coexistence Solutions, and the WCC, this program provides subsidies for the removal or replacement of unwanted or poorly managed fruit trees that may attract bears and other wildlife to help prevent conflict. The program has so far facilitated the removal of 32 trees, of which 4 were removed this year. Data collected each season will help further develop the program for the following year. Fruit tree management is of growing concern for communities in bear country, which may create opportunities for future collaboration.

During the month of September, WildSafeBC puts on BC Goes Wild, an annual event which features a photography contest and a variety of other special activities put on across the Province by WCCs. In addition to booking as many public engagements as possible, the WCC also created a new set of outreach materials, including an animal track identification activity to set up at booths, a new colouring sheet, and eye-catching modules for the display board (Figure 5).



Figure 5. WildSafeBC display booth showcasing BC Goes Wild month.

Challenges and Opportunities

The surge in outdoor recreation following the Covid-19 pandemic remains in effect; trail and backcountry use remains high for visitors and locals alike. Record-breaking wildfire activity across the province impacted tourism and displaced wildlife. These effects were amplified by the El Niño-Southern Oscillation. Climate change and other environmental factors contribute to habitat loss and subsequently increase human-wildlife conflict.

Solid waste management remains a key issue for communities in the program area. Unsecured garbage continues to be the most reported wildlife attractant. In places with curbside pickup, complications arise regarding proper storage of bins between collection days. Creating a pickup schedule that both minimizes early-morning access by wildlife and accommodates shift work is also an issue. In places without curbside pickup, access to wildlife-resistant storage containers and infrastructure is inconsistent. This was notable in mobile home parks in Fernie and Sparwood. In Fernie, there is growing demand for large public bins such as those located at City Hall and the

aquatic centre. However, overfilling or dumping at these communal bins is not uncommon, resulting in access by bears on multiple occasions.

While garbage is almost universally understood to be an inappropriate food source for wildlife, tree fruit does not have the same reputation. Unmanaged fruit trees are a powerful attractant and present a different set of challenges. Many of these trees are on private property and require the cooperation of residents to manage. Sentimental attachment to fruit trees and concerns about food security contribute to a general hesitancy towards tree removal across the program area. However, removal alternatives, such as fruit-sharing networks and gleaning programs, are not widely available. Maintaining the trees properly is time consuming and costly. The continued implementation of a cost-share program to allow willing residents to remove unmanaged trees is recommended.

Communities in the program area are home to long-time residents, seasonal workers, second homeowners and visitors, all with different levels of understanding and tolerance for wildlife. A multi-pronged approach to education and outreach is required to accommodate this diverse population. As the communities continue to grow and develop, there will be new people, new bears, and more opportunities for conflict.

The following initiatives should continue to be implemented in 2024:

- Update and standardize WildSafeBC messaging made available digitally or physically by community partners.
- Support Fernie bylaw services in ongoing updates to policy and messaging surrounding attractant management.
- Revisit work done by previous WCC aimed at reducing human-wildlife conflict around commercial bins.
- Continue work with local biologists on the Fruit Tree Removal/Replacement Project, starting much earlier in the season if possible, including cross-promotion of the fruit tree replacement grant offered by the District of Sparwood.
- Build on existing partnerships while also establishing new ones, especially those involved in recreation.
- Seek out opportunities for engagement in smaller communities in the program area.
- Increase social media engagement by posting more often and more consistently.
- Promote Bare Campsite Program early on, especially in the South Country.
- Revisit relationships with the Ktunaxa Nation and Nupqu.

The WildSafeBC Program continues to be well received, supported and in-demand from various organizations, residents and visitors. Over the years, the program has formed many valuable partnerships and should continue collaborating with community organizations to help keep wildlife wild and communities safe.

Acknowledgements

WildSafeBC Fernie Elk Valley South Country is grateful for the generous support the program receives from sponsors, partners and volunteers. Thanks to our sponsors: the Province of British Columbia, Columbia Basin Trust, British Columbia Conservation Foundation, Regional District of the East Kootenay, and City of Fernie.

Our community partners have provided invaluable support and guidance. Thank you to: Conservation Officers Ryan Gordon, Trish Burley, and Dylan Yetter, Bylaw Officers Tom Kramer, Robyn Leach, and Allison Strasser; Dr. Clayton Lamb and Biodiversity Solutions; Gillian Sanders of Grizzly Bear Coexistence Solutions; City of Fernie Staff and Council; District of Sparwood Staff and Council; Teachers and Staff at School District 5; College of the Rockies Fernie campus faculty; Staff at the Fernie Heritage Library and the Sparwood Public Library; Free Press; 2dayFM; Tourism Fernie & AmbassadorWILD.

Finally, thank you to the members of these great communities for engaging with the program, and for being patient and welcoming to the new WCC.