

# WildSafeBC Annual Report 2023

## 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 fifth season that the program was delivered in the Northern Rockies Regional Municipality (NRRM). 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 town site, which has the highest density of people.

In 2023, there were 151 black bear calls to the British Columbia Conservation Officer (COS) RAPP Line. Garbage remains the most reported attractant. Fruit trees are also an attractant with bears appearing to favourite Choke Cherry, apple and crabapple trees.

The WCC performed outreach activities with the goal of preventing conflict with wildlife in the community. The following summarizes key program deliverables of the WCC over the course of the 2023 season:

- 7 bear safety presentations and/or bear spray demonstrations with 33 participants.
- 4 WildSafe Rangers Programs were delivered with 64 participants.
- The WCC was able to set up 7 display booths over the season with 695 attendees.
- The WCC reached 346 homes through door-to-door education and placed 213 'warning' stickers on garbage bins left on the curb too early, too late, overnight, or overflowing.
- 212 garbage bins tagged in 2023
- No new campgrounds signed on for the BARE Campsite Program
- No new businesses signed on for the Business Pledge Program
- 122 new post to the WildSafeBC Northern Rockies page with 459 new followers in 2023

Challenges this season included the wildfire season and resulting poor air quality. The Fort Nelson Airport recorded 1054 hours of smoke from May to October. This negatively affected the WCC's ability to conduct bin tagging, door to door canvassing, bear spray demonstrations, and outdoor display booths.

Successes this season include continued collaboration with the COS in 2023. The Northern Rockies Fire Rescue (Bylaw) was required to respond to the wildfires in the area, limiting their capacity to collaborate with the WCC in 2023.

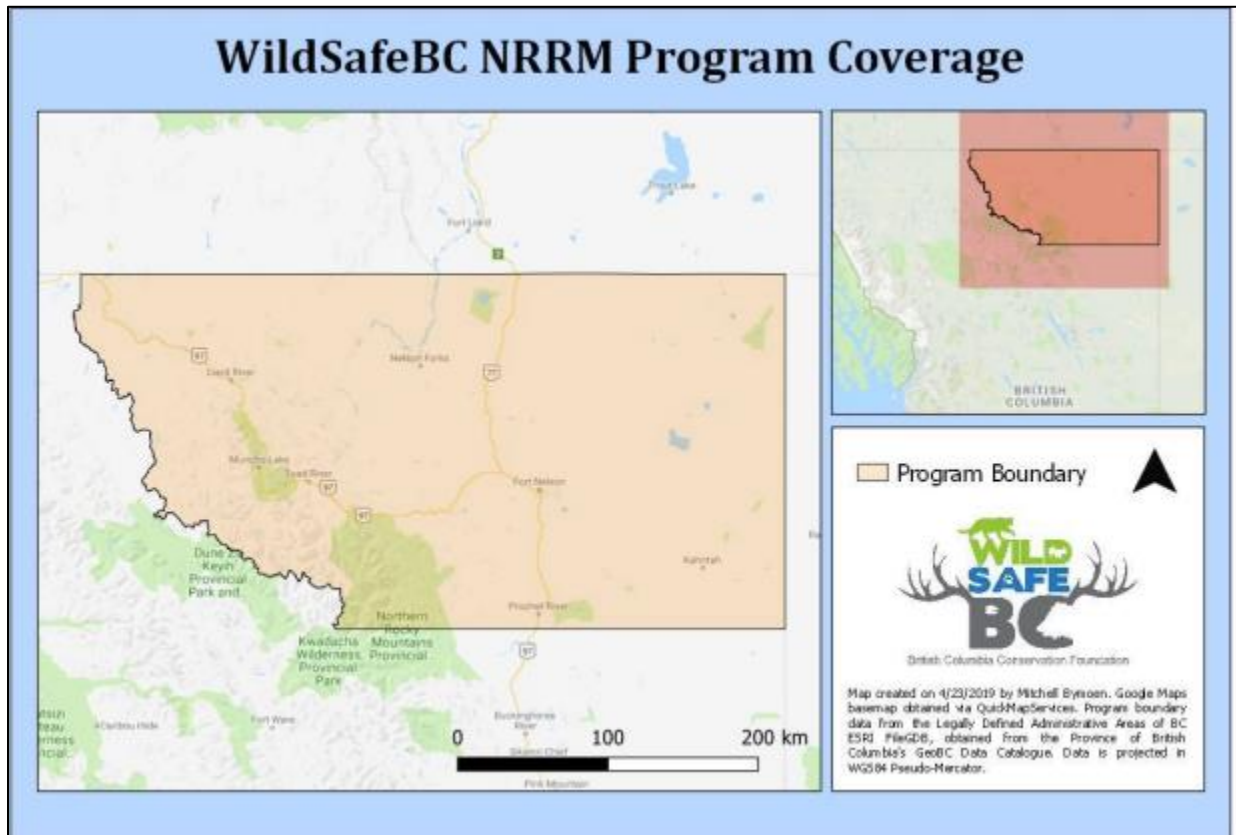


Figure 1. WildSafeBC Northern Rockies program coverage area.

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Cover Photo: Collaboration with Discover Parks at Moyie Provincial Park - Bear Behaviour and Identification Presentation - July 22nd, 2023

## Highlights from the 2023 Season

### Wildlife Activity

There were 151 human-wildlife conflict reports to the RAPP line (COS). Majority of these reports pertained to food-conditioned black bears (Figure 2). It was a weird year. Fort Nelson saw a number of black bears arrive in town fairly early, disappear for a couple months, return, then disappear again. This pattern continued throughout the summer and fall. A hot, dry summer and fall, with little to no precipitation meant there was an abundance of natural food. The availability of natural foods in forested habitat translated into non-natural food sources not being sought out as often as we usually see (bears did not frequent town as often or for as long. There were no black bears relocated in 2023 and 4 black bears were euthanized.

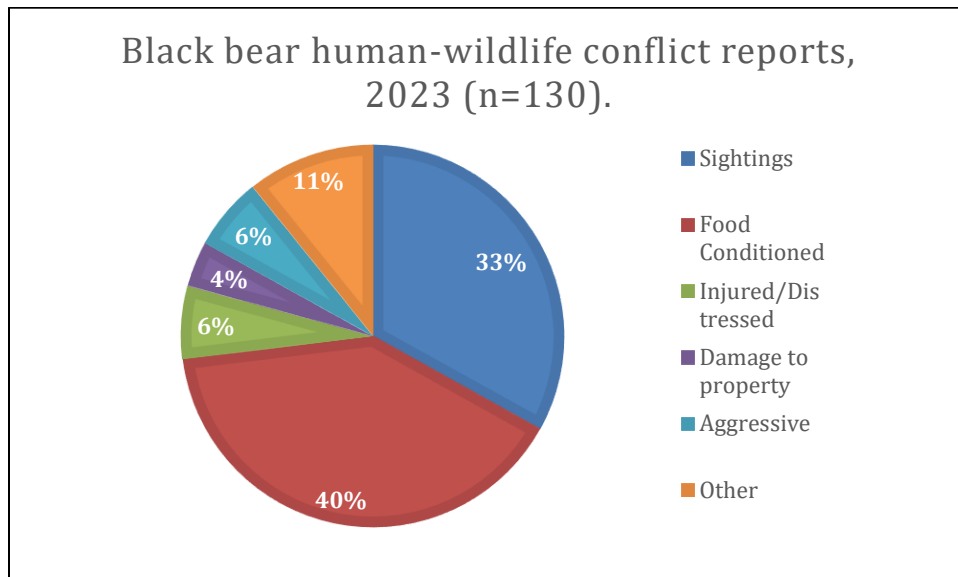


Figure 2. Black bear Human Wildlife Conflict Reports (n=130) made to the BC Conservation Officer Service 2023.

### WildSafe Ranger Program

The WildSafe Ranger Program (WRP) introduces youth to the concept of human-wildlife conflict through interactive lesson plans (Figure 3). This season, the WRP was delivered to 4 schools or community groups reaching more than 170 youth (Table 1). In September, as part of our BC Goes Wild Event, the WCC delivered a modified WRP reaching 100 children during the 2023 Street Festival.



Figure 3. Presentation to children at the Fort Nelson Aboriginal Friendship Society.

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

School / Group	Grade	Students	Extended
Fort Nelson Secondary School	8	21	No
Fort Nelson Family Development Centre	N/A	30	No
Fort Nelson Aboriginal Friendship Society	N/A	10	No
Fort Nelson Heritage Museum	N/A	3	No
<b>TOTAL Participants</b>		<b>64</b>	

## Presentations to Community Groups

WildSafeBC can provide a variety of presentations depending on the interest of the group and these include wildlife awareness and safety, bear spray workshops, electric fencing workshops or other subjects falling within the scope of the WildSafeBC Program (Figure 4). The WCC gave 7 presentations to a total of 33 attendees (Table 2) and 1 presentation was cancelled because no one attended.

Table 2. Presentations delivered to community groups in 2023.

Group	Type of Presentation	Participants
Fort Nelson Heritage Museum	Bear Safety & Bear Spray Demo	5
Riggs Safety	Bear Spray Safety & Demo X 2	16
Riggs Safety	Bear Safety & Awareness X 2	2
Fort Nelson Heritage Museum	Bear Spray Demo	2
MLA Dan Davies Office	Bear Safety & Awareness	8
<b>TOTAL Participants</b>		<b>33</b>



Figure 4. Bear Safety and Awareness MLA office (left), Fort Nelson Demo Forest Bear Spray Demo (right).

## Display Booths

Display booths are an excellent way to reach many people over a short period of time and increase awareness about WildSafeBC and its messaging (Figure 5). The WCC held WildSafeBC display booths at 8 community events where 770 people visited:

- Phoenix Theatre, Earth Stewardship Day (75)
- Fort Nelson Heritage Museum Grand Re-Opening (160)
- Fort Nelson Farmers Market (35)
- Fort Nelson First Nation Annual Celebration (50)
- Teddy Bear Picnic (75)
- Northern Rockies Arts Council Street Festival (100)
- NRRM Trail Mix Fun Run and Half Marathon (75)



Figure 5. Display booths at Culture Festival, (left) and Teddy Bear Picnic (right).

## BC Goes Wild

BC Goes Wild is an annual campaign held by WildSafeBC to celebrate BC’s wildlife. The campaign is held in September, which is typically the month when human-bear conflicts are at their highest in BC. On September 8<sup>th</sup>, WildSafeBC Northern Rockies partnered with the Northern Rockies Arts Council to set up an outdoor booth at the 2023 Street Festival. This booth included an interactive kids table where children were provided scavenger hunt and facticity sheets and were encouraged to participate in WildSafeBC’s 2023 Coloring and Drawing Contest. Kids learned about wildlife attractants and their participation was rewarded with gummy bears and “Bear Paw” cookies. This event was a success with 100 people in attendance learning about wildlife attractants. Event attendees entered a draw for a prize bag full of WildSafeBC and Conservation Officer Service materials. This successful collaboration with the Northern Rockies Arts Council should be continued in 2024.

## Door-to-Door Education and Bin Tagging

The WCC had an increased focus on door-to-door canvassing this season compared to previous years. Door-to-door canvassing was completed multiple times during the season with almost 350 houses visited. The WCC focused on areas that historically had high levels of wildlife conflicts. The WCC provided homeowners with key information regarding their waste bins, proper storage, and curbside pickup. A total of 308 homes were reached via door hangers and 38 people were reached through in-person conversations. The WCC visited homes with visible apple or crab apple trees and distributed a Fruit Gleaning Poster (Figure 6). The WCC noticed that many homeowners were quicker to pick the fruit off their trees once provided with this education. The WCC paid a return visit to thank the homeowners.

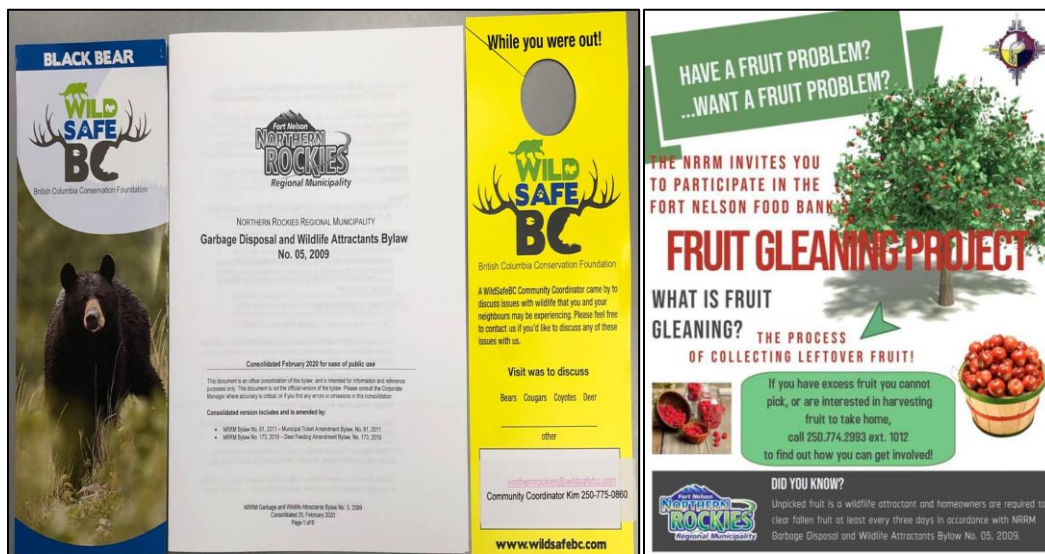


Figure 6. Information packages for door-to-door canvassing.

Garbage tagging consists of placing a visible and removable “warning” stickers on bins that have been put out too early, brought in too late or left out overnight. The purpose of garbage tagging is



to remind residents that garbage left on the curb is a wildlife attractant. 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 randomly between the hours of 9:45pm and 11:00pm. The WCC completed bin tagging frequently at the beginning of the season, tapering off towards the end. Bins left out overnight were usually tagged between 8:00am and 9:00am the day after collection.

Bin tagging took place from early May to October 6<sup>th</sup> and a total of 212 bins were tagged. Reasons for the bin receiving tags included, 42 for being placed at the curb prior to collection day, 120 for being at the curb after 7pm on collection day (Figure 7), and 50 were tagged after being left at the curb overnight (Figure 8). A total of 32 bins were stickered for having repeated the behavior more than once and these required follow up education from the WCC. There were 7 bins that received education stickers three or more times and those were forwarded to NRRM for further follow up. While the bin tagging education program is successful in changing behavior's over 85% of the time, some residents are still non-compliant with the NRRM's bylaws.

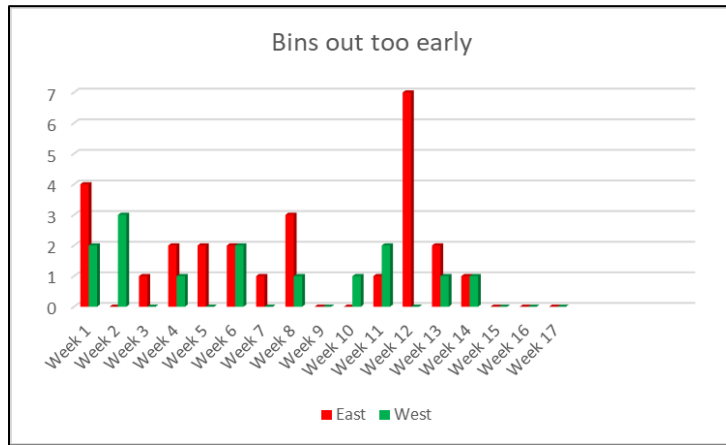


Figure 7. Number of garbage bins tagged for being put out in Fort Nelson prior to collection time of 5:00 am on collection day (May 1 – October 6, 2023)

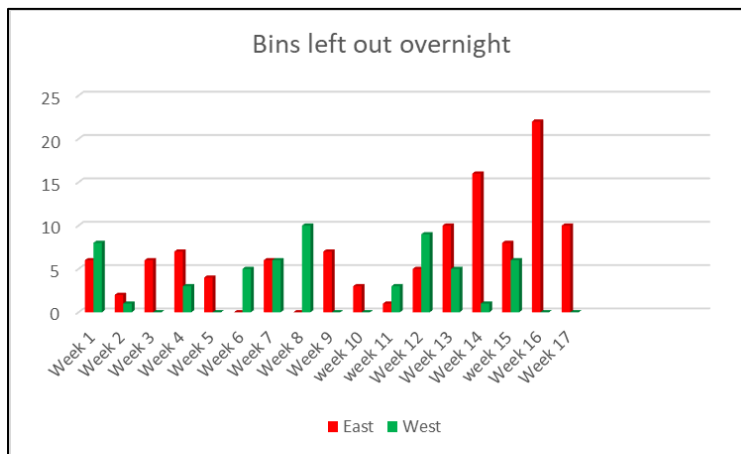


Figure 8. Bins left out too late or overnight on/after collection day.

It should be noted that the WCC observed several factors leading to an increase in leaving bins out. First, rain or snowfall resulted in a larger number of bins left out on the street beyond collection times. Second, the WCC also saw an increase in bins left out on Thursday evenings before a long weekend. Third, the WCC notice more bins being put out too early as the days became shorter and daylight hours became more limited. Lastly, bins were observed out on the curb four or five days after pickup, which the WCC attributes to tenants that have vacated rental properties.

## Social Media and Press

The WildSafeBC Northern Rockies Facebook page continues to grow in popularity and the page grew from 421 followers in 2022 to 459 followers in October 2023. A total of 117 Facebook posts were made in 2023. Efforts were made this season to tag the NRRM and the COS in posts to increase the pages overall reach. The Facebook page received less engagement in 2023 than in previous years, but the WCC did receive a significant increase in telephone calls and private messages using Facebook.

## Collaborations

Community Collaborations are essential to the WildSafeBC Program. The WCC continued to strengthen WildSafeBC's collaboration with the COS, who continued to provide guidance and support in 2023. The WCC also partnered with Riggs Safety Ltd. to deliver several bear safety presentations and bear spray demonstrations.

## WildSafeBC Business Pledge

The WildSafeBC Business Pledge Program has been developed to encourage businesses to set 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. No businesses signed the pledge this year. Capacity issues prevented the WCC from approaching businesses about the program. This should be a priority for future seasons, as local businesses that have food waste are monitored bi-monthly and any issues that have arisen are already typically dealt with immediately after the owner has been notified.

## 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. There are no campsites in the Northern Rockies that are participating in the Bare Campsite program. One campsite was approached, but did not participate. This campsite changed ownership and the WCC was unable to connect with the new owner about the program. It was unclear if it would remain a public camp site.

The WCC continued to monitor both local campsites by driving through campsites twice a month checking for commercial bins that were not closed as well as poor attractant management issues throughout the campsites. Both campsites had limited issues all season. WCC has been well received by campers.

The Northern Rockies Regional Municipality operates two regional campsites within an hour of town (formerly Provincial Campgrounds), but have decided not to participate in the program this season. The WCC hoped those two campsites will come on board for 2024.

## Indigenous Awareness and Engagement

The WCC completed an Indigenous Corporate Training course this season as a new training opportunity. The WCC is now equipped with many tools to ensure effective, respectful and worthwhile interactions with Indigenous communities in the future. Other efforts for Indigenous Engagement include shared messaging and attending events with the Fort Nelson First Nation.

This season, the WCC tagged the Fort Nelson First Nation in Facebook posts when relevant. WildSafeBC also set up a booth at the Fort Nelson First Nation (FNFN) Treaty days in August of 2023. The WCC also attended National Indigenous Peoples Day with FNFN members. The WCC did not set up a booth but rather participated and watched activities while in attendance. The orange shirt provided by WildSafeBC was worn 90% of the time while giving presentations and while manning our various booths throughout the community.

## Special Initiatives

The WCC continued to work with the Fort Nelson Aboriginal Friendship Society (FNAFS). In 2021, the FNAFS took over the management and operation of the fruit gleaning group in all aspects. The community's abundance of fruit from local fruit trees is now shared with the local food bank. The goal of the initiative is to match homeowners with too much fruit on their trees with residents that want/need fruit. Unpicked fruit remaining on both municipal and residential fruit trees continues to be a problem in the Northern Rockies. It is unclear if the FNAFS will continue with the management in 2024.

A collaboration between the NRRM, COS, and WildSafeBC has made great progress towards the NRRM's commitment to becoming a bear smart community through an enormous amount of work since. That work has not filtered out into the community, therefore it is not well understood. A community event was planned to provide an opportunity to present the hard work of all of the partners in an effort to show the public what we are trying to collaboratively achieve (Figure 9). The "Let's Talk Bears" session was attended by 8 members of the public, it is uncertain whether or not we achieved our goal in disseminating information to the public.



Figure 9. Community Information session to inform the public of the NRRM's collaborative efforts to become a Bear Smart Community.

## Challenges and Opportunities

The NRRM is a large geographical area that encompasses almost 10% of the province, which is roughly 85,000 square kilometers. The WCC focused programming efforts on the more densely populated community of Fort Nelson. The WCC hopes to reach out to the communities of Toad River, Muncho Lake, and Liard River in 2024.

Recruiting volunteers continues to be a challenge. 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. The WCC successfully obtained one volunteer this season. Additionally, the WCC was supported by the COS and a family member.

Some community members continue to prefer to post bear sightings on social media as opposed to reporting sightings to the COS. The Mayor and Council have expressed that find statistics from the COS are subjective because of this. It is an area of concern that needs to be addressed moving forward. WildSafeBC continues to educate community members to report conflicts with wildlife to the COS RAPP Line early so that the COS and WildSafeBC can provide early interventions to conflicts.

Garbage is a large attractant in the community and results in bears wandering along community streets and into people's yards, which impacts 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 2024:

- Continue to support the NRRM in working towards Bear Smart Community status by implementing some of the recommendations in the HBCMP that was completed in 2022.
- Continue door-to-door campaigns throughout the season in hotspot areas.
- Continue to promote the use of WARP and reporting wildlife conflicts to the COS.

- Continue to gain more followers on the WildSafeBC Northern Rockies Facebook page. Make the WSBC Facebook Northern Rockies page the place where residents can go to seek current, valuable, and factual information, along with the NRRMs Wildlife Encounters website page.
- 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.
- Increase both Bear Spray Demonstrations and Bear Aware & Safety Presentations.

Fruit trees continue to draw wildlife into residential areas which keeps them there for longer periods of time. This impacts the safety of the neighborhood. Several areas have been identified as hotspots in the community and would continue to benefit from increased education and fruit gleaning activities like what we achieved this year. To address the abundance of fruit in the community, the following initiatives are recommended for 2024:

- Municipality to implement suggestions in the Arborists report received in 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.
- Continue to connect residents to the FNAFS (Fruit Gleaning) or find other suitable management if required.

## 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. 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 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.