

WildSafeBC Annual Report 2020

Cowichan Valley

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Executive Summary

In 2020, the WildSafeBC (WSBC) Cowichan Valley program entered its fourth year. WildSafeBC Cowichan Valley acknowledges that it operates on the unceded traditional territories of the Cowichan Tribes, Halalt First Nation, Lake Cowichan First Nation, Lyackson First Nation, Malahat First Nation, Penelakut Tribe, and Stz'uminus First Nation. This report describes the activities of WildSafeBC in the Cowichan Valley from April 15 to November 30, 2020. As a large geographical region (Figure 1), education through door-to-door activities, presentations, and information tables was focused on hotspot areas of bear conflict. Black bears attracted to garbage generated the highest number of calls to the BC Conservation Officer Service (COS) in the Cowichan Valley.

The WildSafeBC Community Coordinator (WCC), Amanda Crowston, 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 WCC gave 17 presentations to over 290 people, reached 757 people through door-to-door efforts, and spoke with 240 people at three events across the Cowichan Valley. On social media, the WSBC Cowichan Valley Facebook page more than doubled its followers in 2020 and now has 565 followers.

WildSafeBC Cowichan Valley would not be possible without the support of the Cowichan Valley Regional District (CVRD), Town of Ladysmith, Municipality of North Cowichan (MNC), Town of Lake Cowichan, the Ministry of Environment and Climate Change Strategy, and British Columbia Conservation Foundation. Looking towards 2021, the main goal is to educate the general public across the Cowichan Valley about wildlife safety and to change perception of what human-wildlife conflict is and how to minimize conflict. This education can be accomplished by reaching more people through the WildSafe Ranger Program, community events, online presentations, and door-to-door activities. Through education, collaboration and community solutions, we can keep wildlife wild and communities safe.



Figure 1. WildSafeBC Cowichan Valley program coverage area.

Table of Contents

Executive Summary	1
Highlights from the 2020 Season	5
Wildlife Activity	5
WildSafeBC COVID-19 Mitigation.....	8
WildSafe Ranger Program.....	8
Display Booths	9
Door-to-Door Education and Bin Tagging	11
Social Media and Press.....	14
Wildlife in Area Signs.....	15
Challenges and Opportunities	15
Acknowledgements.....	16

Table of Figures

Figure 1. WildSafeBC Cowichan Valley program coverage area.....	2
Figure 2. Total reports to the COS and WARP in the Cowichan Valley for all wildlife from January 1, 2016 to November 1, 2020.	5
Figure 3. Species reports to the COS and WARP in the Cowichan Valley from January 1, 2016 to October 31, 2020.	6
Figure 4. Reports to the COS and WARP regarding black bears from January 1, 2016 to November 1, 2020 in the Cowichan Valley.....	6
Figure 5. Species reports to the COS and WARP in the Cowichan Valley from January 1, 2016 to November 1, 2020.....	7
Figure 6. Annual reports for all wildlife by Cowichan Valley areas, 2016 to November 1, 2020. Central North Cowichan was defined as Chemainus, Cowichan Valley, Cowichan, Crofton, Duncan, Genoa Bay, Glenora, Maple Bay, North Cowichan, Sahtlam, Saltair, Skutz Falls, Westholme; Cowichan Bay as Caycuse, Cowichan Lake, Honeymoon Bay, Lake Cowichan, Meade Creek, Mesachie Lake, Youbou; Laysmith as Ladysmith, Oyster Bay, Thetis Island and Yellow Point; and South Cowichan as Bamberton, Cobble Hill, Cowichan Bay, Cowichan Station, Malahat, Mill Bay, and Shawnigan Lake.....	8
Table 1: Schools that received the WildSafe Ranger Program in 2020.	9
Figure 7. Grade 5 students from École Cobble Hill are shown elk antlers during a WildSafe Rangers presentation.....	9
Table 2. Public information tables in 2020.....	10
Figure 8. The Cowichan Valley WCC at the Honeymoon Bay Market, Saturday 5, 2020.....	10
Figure 9. A mountain biker learns about wildlife, Maple Mountain trailhead.....	11
Figure 10. The WCC canvassing by leaving information door hangers.	11
Table 3. Areas canvassed in 2020.	12

Figure 11. Garbage and organic bins placed out the night before collection day received a tag warning that garbage placed out early is a bear attractant.	12
Table 4. Areas that received garbage tagging in 2020.	13
Figure 12. Number of bins placed out early for collection before and after education in the Municipality of North Cowichan, BC.	13
Figure 13. Number of bins placed out early for collection before and after education in the Town of Lake Cowichan, BC.....	14
Figure 14. Advertisement in the Cowichan Valley Voice.....	15

Cover Photo: WildSafeBC Cowichan Valley Coordinator teaching the WildSafe Rangers program to grade two students, June 2020.

Highlights from the 2020 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) which is updated daily on the WildSafeBC website. There were a total of 816 wildlife reports for Cowichan Valley from January 1, 2020 to November 1, 2020, with an increase of calls in the spring compared to previous years (Figure 2).

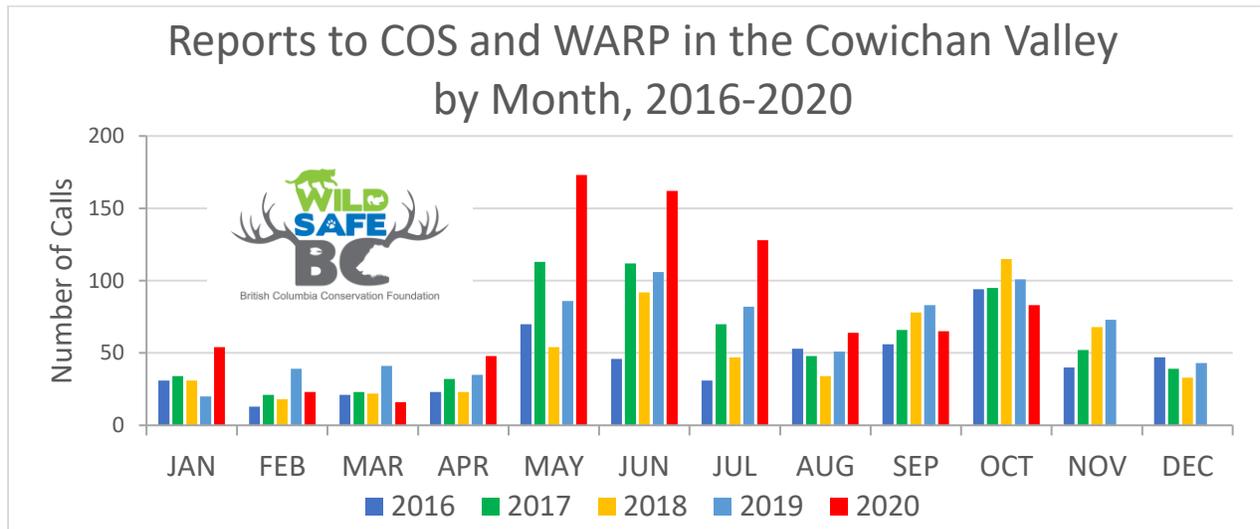


Figure 2. Total reports to the COS and WARP in the Cowichan Valley for all wildlife from January 1, 2016 to November 1, 2020.

The number of black bear calls (423) was higher than the previous four year average of 315 (Figure 3). Deer reports also increased over previous years, however cougar and elk calls remained consistent with previous years (Figure 3). Other wildlife calls include raptors, wolves and non-specified animals.

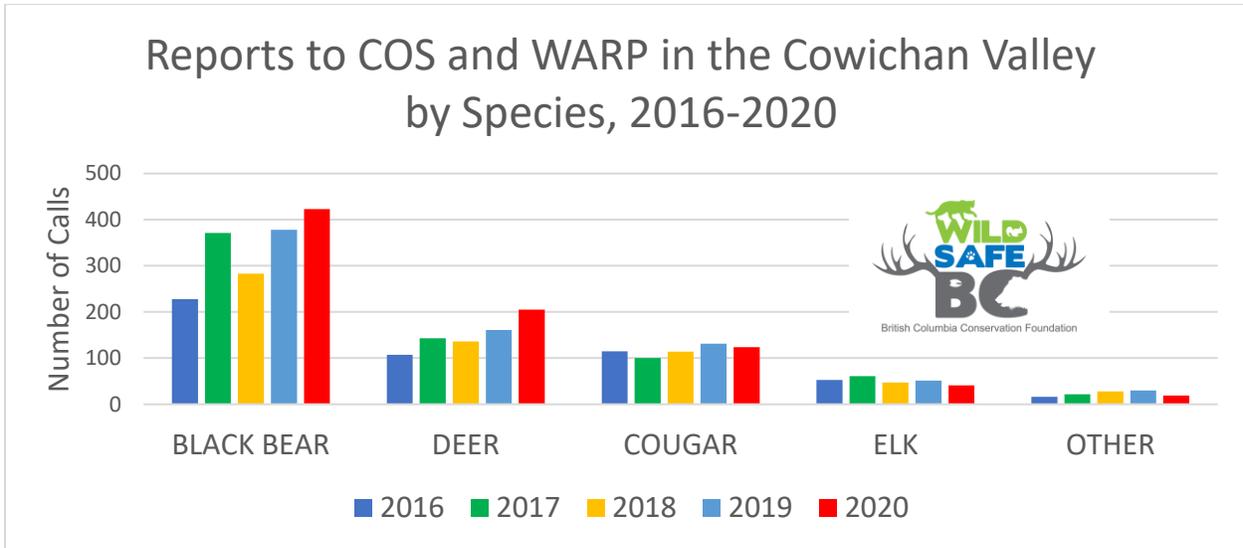


Figure 3. Species reports to the COS and WARP in the Cowichan Valley from January 1, 2016 to October 31, 2020.

In the Cowichan Valley, there was a spike of black bear calls in May, June, and July, possibly a result of more people at home due to COVID-19 which increased the amount of household garbage (Figure 4).

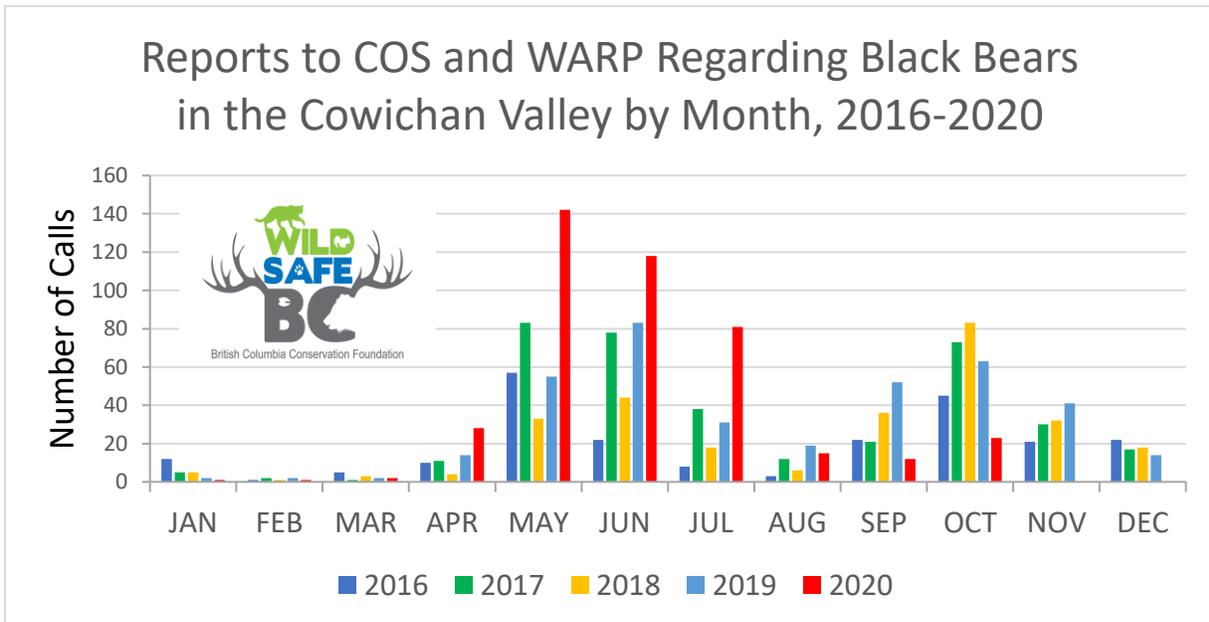


Figure 4. Reports to the COS and WARP regarding black bears from January 1, 2016 to November 1, 2020 in the Cowichan Valley.

Garbage remained the most reported black bear attractant, with 135 calls in 2020 (Figure 5). Black bears were also reported for being attracted to compost (25 calls), livestock (33 calls), residential fruit trees and berries (7 calls) and pets (13 calls). Additional attractants associated

with black bear reports in 2020 included: bird feeders, commercial vineyards and orchards, beehives, pet food, freezers, crops, barbeques, and livestock feed.

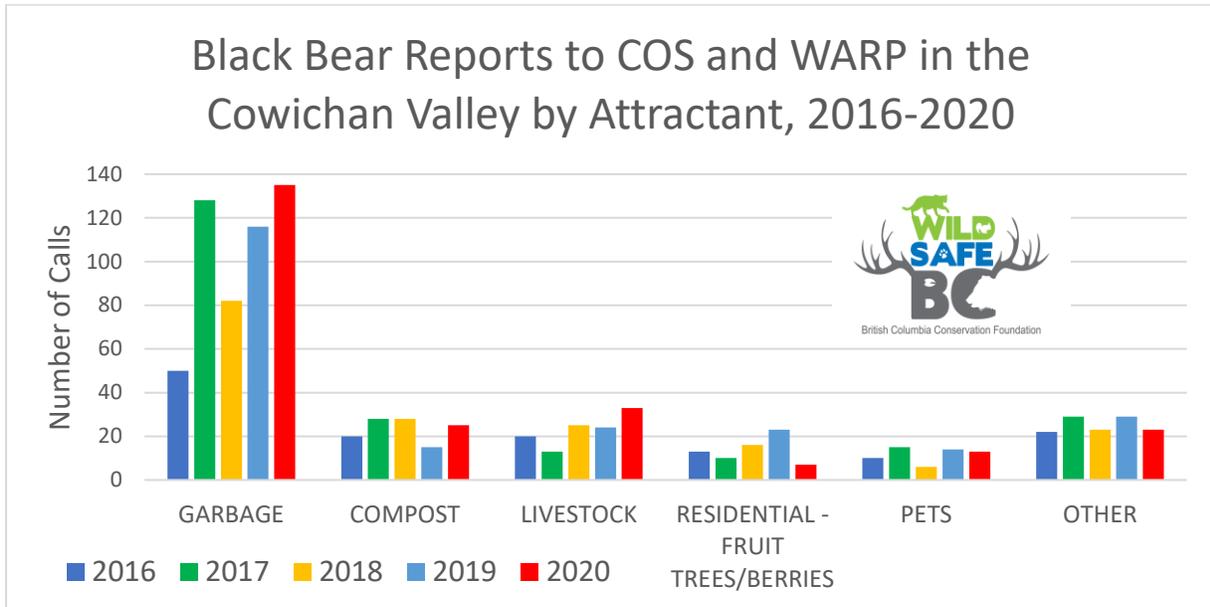


Figure 5. Species reports to the COS and WARP in the Cowichan Valley from January 1, 2016 to November 1, 2020.

The Cowichan Valley is composed of many communities over a large area. With regards to wildlife activity, a regional breakdown of wildlife reports can help understand patterns and allow the WCC to target hot spots with appropriate strategies to reduce human-wildlife conflict. For clarity, the WCC categorized the region into the following areas: Central/North Cowichan, Cowichan Lake, Ladysmith, and South Cowichan.

In 2020, the Cowichan Lake saw a decrease of wildlife reports compared to 2019 (Figure 6) and Ladysmith had the lowest number of calls (50) since the WildSafeBC Program started in the Cowichan Valley. North/Central Cowichan saw a slight increase over previous years while the South Cowichan region saw a 150% increase over the average of 200 calls from the previous four years.

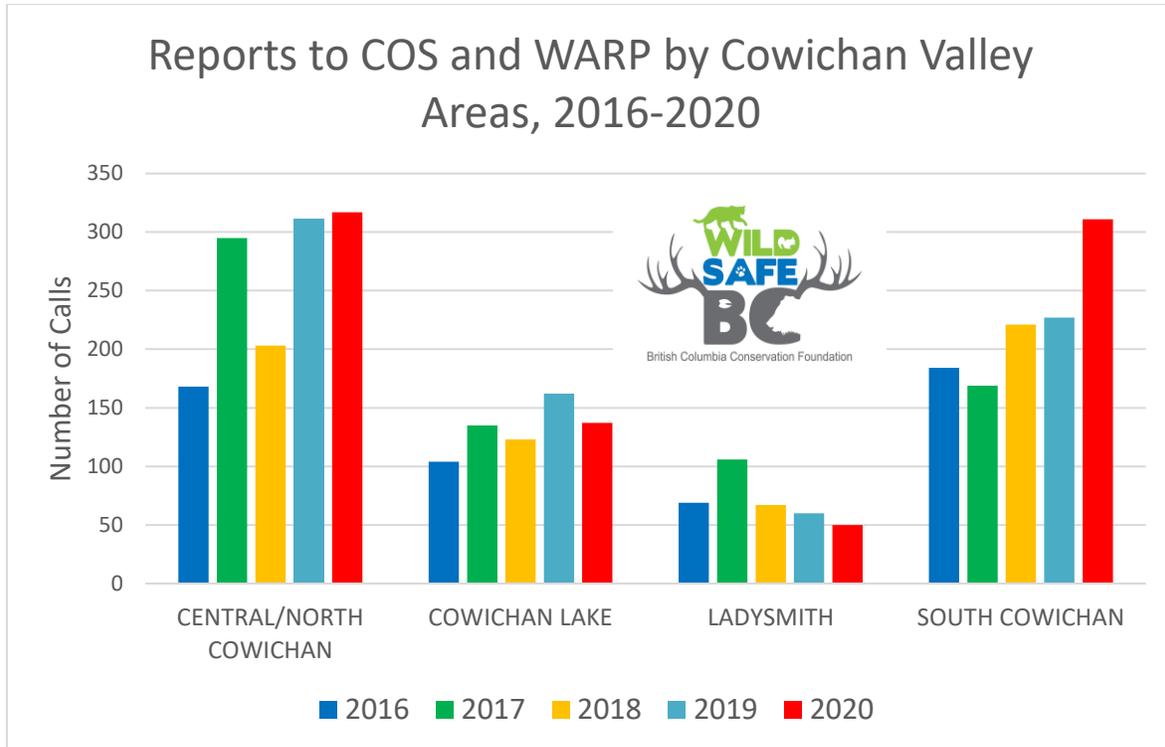


Figure 6. Annual reports for all wildlife by Cowichan Valley areas, 2016 to November 1, 2020. Central North Cowichan was defined as Chemainus, Cowichan Valley, Cowichan, Crofton, Duncan, Genoa Bay, Glenora, Maple Bay, North Cowichan, Sahtlam, Saltair, Skutz Falls, Westholme; Cowichan Bay as Caycuse, Cowichan Lake, Honeymoon Bay, Lake Cowichan, Meade Creek, Mesachie Lake, Youbou; Ladysmith as Ladysmith, Oyster Bay, Thetis Island and Yellow Point; and South Cowichan as Bamberton, Cobble Hill, Cowichan Bay, Cowichan Station, Malahat, Mill Bay, and Shawnigan Lake.

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 WCCs were required to provide safety plans if they were organizing events where people would congregate. Wherever possible, in person activities were replaced with video conferencing. WildSafeBC adapted and modified requirements as the Province moved from Phase 1 to Phase 3. The WCCs worked closely with their local communities to ensure that all local requirements and restrictions were respected.

WildSafe Ranger Program

The WildSafe Ranger Program introduces students to the concept of human-wildlife conflict and encourages them to take an active role in reducing human-wildlife conflict at home by helping their families identify backyard wildlife attractants. With the cancellation of school during the spring and COVID-19 safety procedures limiting guest speakers, WildSafeBC offered online and

outdoor presentations. Three schools participated in the WildSafe Ranger Program through outdoor presentations that allowed for physical distancing (Figure 7). Over 290 students became WildSafe Rangers and received kits (Table 1) that included a WildSafe Ranger colouring book, pin, pencil, sticker, tattoo and card. Although no online presentations were requested by schools, one online presentation was done for a family in the spring, which led to the grade 7 presentations at Ecole Cobble Hill in June.

Table 1: Schools that received the WildSafe Ranger Program in 2020.

School	Grade	Students
Ecole Cobble Hill	2, 5, 6, 7	105
Ladysmith Primary	K, 1	68
Discovery Elementary	2, 4, 5, 6, 7	118



Figure 7. Grade 5 students from École Cobble Hill are shown elk antlers during a WildSafe Rangers presentation.

Display Booths

In the wake of the cancellation of most public events in 2020 due to COVID-19, the WCC held three information tables in popular spots across the valley (Table 2). A total of 240 people visited the booths. The first table was held at the Mt. Tzouhalem Kaska trailhead in the spring as black bears had been frequenting the residential area adjacent to the Mt. Tzouhalem forest. Safety on the trail for hikers and mountain bikers was a popular topic with the public.

Table 2. Public information tables in 2020.

Location	Date	Visits
Mt. Tzouhalem Trailhead (Kaspa Road)	May 23	60
Honeymoon Bay Market	September 5	120
Maple Mountain Trailhead (Osborne Bay Road)	September 19	60

The two other information booths were a part WildSafeBC's 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 Saturday, September 5, a WildSafeBC booth was set up at the Honeymoon Bay Market in Honeymoon Bay (Figure 8). There were 120 visits to the booth and information given about bear safety, fruit picking (which is a concern in Honeymoon Bay), cougar safety, and elk and deer behaviour. Children who visited the booth were happy to receive the WildSafe Ranger colouring book and tattoos. This market is popular with locals and tourists and would be a great market to continue being a part of in the future.



Figure 8. The Cowichan Valley WCC at the Honeymoon Bay Market, Saturday 5, 2020.

The second event was held on Saturday, September 19, with a set up at the trailhead to Maple Mountain, off the Osborne Bay Road entrance. The coordinator talked to 60 people about hiking and mountain biking wildlife safety, bears and cougars in the area, and attractant management (Figure 9). The coordinator also connected with a member of the Cowichan Trail Stewardship Society about future workshops and events to work on together.



Figure 9. A mountain biker learns about wildlife, Maple Mountain trailhead.

The WCC also planned three other events, in order to cover every area of the region, however, the Ladysmith booth at Transfer Beach was cancelled due to wildfire smoke and the two events at Cobble Hill Mountain Park were cancelled due to heavy rain.

Door-to-Door Education and Bin Tagging

Door-to-door canvassing was modified this year to consist of leaving door hangers rather than knocking on doors as has been done in the past (Figure 10). If people were in their yards, the WCC was able to discuss reducing wildlife conflict in person. While in person conversations were reduced, more households received information through the door hangers.



Figure 10. The WCC canvassing by leaving information door hangers.

In 2020, South Cowichan was a hot spot for black bear calls. The WCC visited Cobble Hill, Cowichan Bay, Mill Bay and three areas of Shawnigan Lake in nine outings with 716 residences visited. As a popular vacation spot along Cowichan Lake, Meade Creek also had bear activity and 41 residences were canvassed (Table 3).

Table 3. Areas canvassed in 2020.

Community	In Person Contact	Door Hanger	Total Households Visited
Cobble Hill, CVRD	13	233	246
Cowichan Bay, CVRD	3	50	53
Meade Creek, CVRD	2	39	41
Mill Bay, CVRD	12	63	75
Shawnigan Beach Estates, CVRD	6	61	67
Shawnigan Heights, CVRD	12	109	121
Shawnigan Village, CVRD	12	142	154
TOTAL	60	697	757

Garbage bin tagging consists of placing a highly visible and removable warning sticker on top of containers set curbside the day before collection (Figure 11). During 13 outings, a total of 523 bins were tagged in the Cowichan Valley (Table 4) in 2020.

In Shawnigan Lake, the Beach Estates, as well as properties around Baldy Mountain, Glen Eagles and Renfrew Road were tagged. Garbage tagging in these areas is inconsistent due to optional private collection, therefore more effort was placed in canvassing.



Figure 11. Garbage and organic bins placed out the night before collection day received a tag warning that garbage placed out early is a bear attractant.

Table 4. Areas that received garbage tagging in 2020.

Area	Municipal Collection Colour Code	Bins Tagged (1 st night)	Bins Tagged (2 nd night)	Bins Tagged (3 rd night)	Repeat Offenders
Shawnigan Lake	n/a	19	n/a	n/a	n/a
Gibbons Road & Area, MNC	Dark Brown	176	112	n/a	6
The Properties, MNC	Red	131	13*	35	18
Lake Cowichan	Green	8	10	n/a	1
Lake Cowichan	Blue	13	2	n/a	0
Lake Cowichan	Purple	3	1	n/a	0

*Note: On the second night of garbage tagging The Properties, some garbage bins were not tagged as there was a mix-up between how garbage and recycling bins are labeled for collection, therefore the graph in Figure 13 compares the number of bins tagged on the first and third nights.

In the Municipality of North Cowichan, two areas were prioritized due to higher bear activity as reported to the COS: Gibbons Road and The Properties. The Gibbons Road area saw a decrease of 64 bins between the first and second nights of tagging, with only six repeat offending addresses. The Properties had a decrease of 96 bins between the first and third nights of tagging (Figure 12), with 18 repeat addresses.

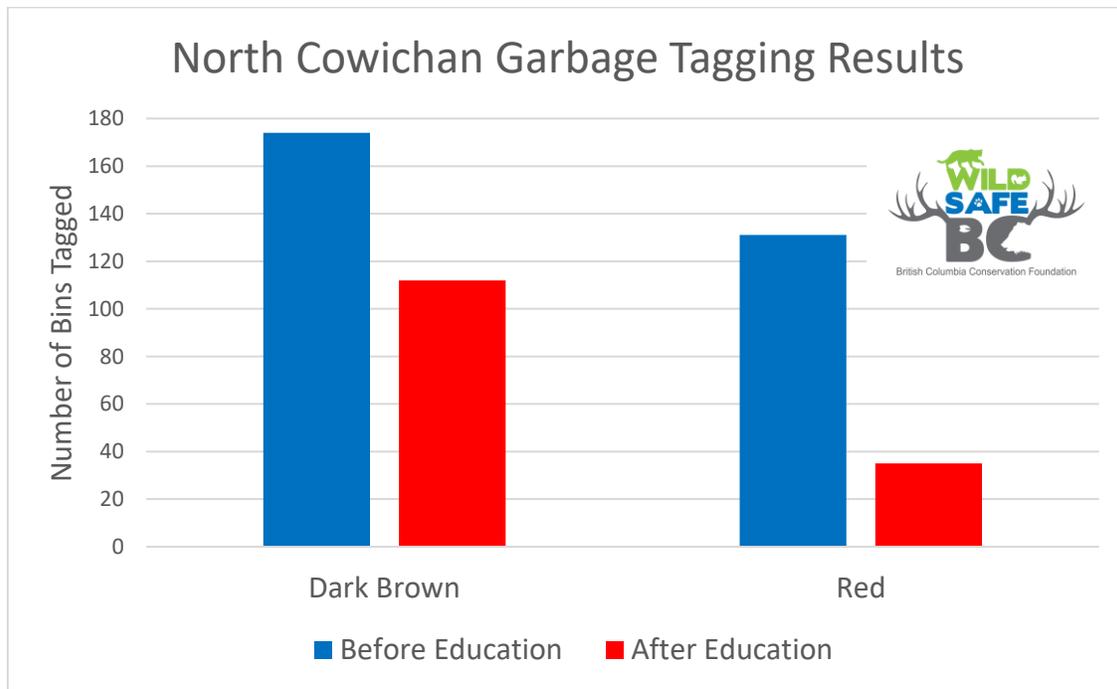


Figure 12. Number of bins placed out early for collection before and after education in the Municipality of North Cowichan, BC.

In Lake Cowichan, all residences in the green, blue, and purple collection areas were surveyed twice (Figure 13). In total, Lake Cowichan had 24 bins out before education and 13 after, with only one repeat.

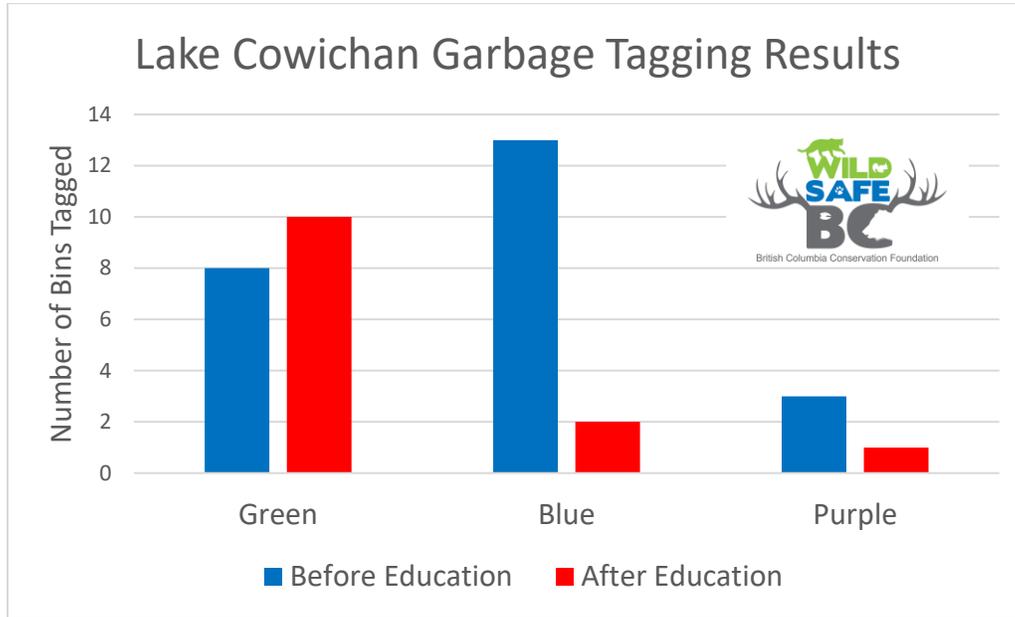


Figure 13. Number of bins placed out early for collection before and after education in the Town of Lake Cowichan, BC.

Social Media and Press

The WildSafeBC Cowichan Valley Facebook page grew almost 250% in 2020 from 226 to 565 page followers. The WCC was interviewed on the local radio station, Juice FM, in the spring about WildSafeBC programs offered in the Cowichan Valley.

In 2019 the WCC was interviewed by the Nanaimo Area Land Trust for a video on hiking safety released in February 2020, which can be found on YouTube at:

https://youtu.be/5Pzm8CVM_mw.

The Cowichan Valley Voice offered free advertising space in five issues in 2020 (Figure 14).



Figure 14. Advertisement in the Cowichan Valley Voice.

Wildlife in Area Signs

The CVRD determined with input from the COS and the WCC that the CVRD Parks department would continue to place Wildlife in Area signs, rather than the WCC. After a volunteer offered to put signage up, the CVRD and COS decided wildlife moved around often enough and the Cowichan Valley has wildlife everywhere that additional signage was not necessary.

Challenges and Opportunities

Though the WildSafeBC program has been impacted by COVID-19 mitigation measures, WildSafeBC was able to successfully modify their traditional outreach activities and take advantage of new technologies to continue to deliver their program safely and effectively.

Large events were cancelled in the spring and there were minimal opportunities for public interaction in the summer and fall. These circumstances gave an opportunity to focus on connecting through social media and offering online presentations. Social media in the Cowichan Valley was given a boost by collaboration with the CVRD, who shared posts from the Cowichan Valley Facebook page. Also, the WCC wrote a weekly WARP update for the region, which was well received. Only one online presentation was requested, with teachers opting to go with outdoor, physically-distanced presentations instead. Creative solutions for connecting with the public were explored through hosting information tables at popular hiking trails.

Waste continues to be the largest source of attractant in the Cowichan Valley. The region covered by the WCC has five systems and schedules of waste removal, with all but one of these regions serviced by municipalities. The challenge for garbage tagging in an area serviced by optional private waste collection (Mill Bay, Shawnigan Lake and Cobble Hill) was inconsistency in using tagging to get the message out about garbage being a bear attractant. Door-to-door

education was utilized for these areas. A larger area was covered when canvassing in 2020 by leaving door hangers rather than engaging each residence.

Another challenge in regards to waste collection is early placement of bins. Areas serviced by the CVRD are under the regional bylaw to store waste in a wild-safe manner and to place on the curb after 5am on collection morning but no other areas have a bylaw with regards to curbside placement. Garbage tagging has been an excellent way to educate residents about early curbside placement, however municipal bylaws with enforcement would also go a long way to address this issue.

To address the issue of waste storage and removal in the community, the following WildSafeBC initiatives should continue in 2021:

- Education campaign focusing on the hazards and solutions through WildSafe Rangers, social media, news articles, and presentations,
- Increase presence at community events and information tables in popular spots around the valley, and
- Increased door-to-door and garbage tagging campaigns in hotspots.

Addressing attractants like livestock, fruit trees and gardens, and compost is complicated because the region is largely rural and there are residents who believe leaving fruit on the trees or dumping the fruit as a source of food for wildlife is positive. It is important to continue to educate the public about reducing human-wildlife conflict and wildlife attractants at public and online events and through social media. Holding electric fence and bear spray workshops would also assist in changing this narrative.

Many wildlife conflicts are underreported in the CVRD. After monitoring social media, the WCC has determined many people post about wildlife conflict that do not have a corresponding entry in WARP. An increased presence in the community through presentations and events in 2021 will benefit the region. Education about when and why to phone the COS, as well as door-to-door canvassing and utilizing social media, will aid in changing beliefs about reporting wildlife conflict.

In 2020, the main focus was in educating residents about reducing human-wildlife conflict. Next year, the WCC will commence WildSafeBC's two new programs, the WildSafe Business Pledge and the WildSafeBC Bare Campsite Program.

Acknowledgements

On behalf of the WildSafeBC program, the WCC would like to thank the Cowichan Valley Regional District, the Municipality of North Cowichan, the Town of Ladysmith, the Town of Lake Cowichan, the Ministry of Environmental and Climate Change Strategy, and the British Columbia Conservation Foundation for sponsoring WildSafeBC in the Cowichan Valley.

The WCC also appreciates the assistance of Sgt. Scott Norris, from the BC Conservation Officer Service, Ilse Saraday, Rob Harris, Nino Morano, and Ingrid Sly from the CVRD, Shawn Chadburn and Don Stewart from the MNC, and volunteer Jamie Crowston. Special thanks to the South Island BC Conservation Officer Service for the use of wildlife specimens for education and Cowichan Valley Voice and for publishing WildSafeBC advertisements at no cost.

Lastly, thank you to all the residents who made an effort this season to remove wildlife attractants from their properties and learn more about our local wildlife. Let's continue to keep wildlife wild and our communities safe!