

Grizzly Bear #66 Banff National Park

The following 2 pieces were written by Jim Pissot

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Those of you at ICOET will recall Dr. Clevenger's photos of grizzly bear # 66 and her three cubs making use of one of the wildlife structures to cross the Trans-Canada Highway in Banff National Park. And you may recall remarks later that the mother grizzly, bear 66, had been killed a couple of weeks ago while foraging along the Canadian Pacific Railway tracks, leaving three six month old orphaned cubs.

Parks Canada has been monitoring those cubs as staff investigates options to relocate them or better protect them in place. Defenders of Wildlife Canada supports Parks Canada in this effort.

This morning brought sad news. Two of the cubs were struck and killed on the Trans-Canada Highway (TCH) near the Banff townsite last night. The third collared cub survived. Apparently park wardens and RCMP officers were in the area "trying to slow traffic." The cubs were killed in a fenced section of the TCH, and it is not known how they got onto the highway. This section of the TCH does not have buried fence aprons, even though they have been recommended for years. Last week, a wolf pup was killed west of Banff near a TCH section that does have buried fence aprons. Parks officials do not know how that wolf got onto the highway.

Will provide more details as they are available. Parks Canada wardens have committed a lot of effort to protect bear 66 and her cubs. We all are devastated and disappointed it has come to this.

Perhaps, contrary to what was asserted at ICOET, we don't yet know "all there is to know" about the design, placement and operation of wildlife crossing structures after all. But then, who really thought we did?

“Sometimes I feel like a motherless bear...a long way from home”

Banff National Park's grizzly bear 66 was struck on the Canadian Pacific Railway line and dragged to her death a little more than two weeks ago. The tragedy leaves three orphaned cubs to fend for themselves—no easy task for seven month old cubs who would normally have stayed with their mother for at least the first three years of their lives.

It is natural for our hearts to go out to these three defenceless cubs. The conservation community and Parks Canada have received many calls and emails from across the country pleading that something be done to help them. The antics of 66 and her cubs had been followed closely this summer as they spent a

fair amount of time in and around the Banff townsite. Park wardens made a tremendous effort to keep her, and people curious about her, out of trouble. But they couldn't keep her out of the way of passing trains. Now, she and her cubs have come to this disappointing end.

For all practical purposes, the August 19th collision between bear 66 and the locomotive took four more grizzly bears from Banff National Park. Dr. Steven Herrero, a prominent grizzly expert at the University of Calgary, estimates that the orphaned cubs' chances of living to maturity are one in one hundred. The U.S. Parks Service counts cubs of the year as mortalities when the mother is killed or missing. Herrero and most other professionals agree that grizzly cubs are not the best candidates for captive rearing and return to the wild, and their recommendations are to let the cubs struggle to survive on their own.

This harsh reality is not a pretty picture.

Our sympathies are understandable, but the question is not what to do for these three cubs. The real question now is what can be done to reduce the chances of other bears—and the mothers of other cubs—from being killed needlessly in Canada's premier national park.

And there is something Canadians and other lovers of things wild can do. Not so much for these cubs, but certainly on behalf of their cousins and other wildlife within Banff National Park.

First, we hope that all Canadians and other visitors to Banff National Park realize, appreciate and support the tremendous effort that goes into protecting the park's treasures for us—and future generations—to enjoy. Protecting bears and other wildlife means that vehicle speeds are limited to 90 km/hr on most of the Trans-Canada Highway through the park, 70 km/hr in critical wildlife areas (particularly unfenced portions), and 60 km/hr on the Bow Valley Parkway. If visitors and travellers want to do something for Banff's bears, they can support—and observe—these necessary speed limits.

We can support the government's efforts to provide wildlife crossing structures—overpasses and tunnels—to help Banff's wildlife cross the road. Parks Canada is a world leader in reducing the impacts of roadways on wildlife, and we need to support the cost of public safety and wildlife conservation on the Trans-Canada Highway through our national parks. Also, consider not stopping when you see that grizzly next to the road. It's usually a short step from comfort around humans to exile to a zoo for park bears. Leave Banff's bears wild.

We can support the temporary and permanent trail closures, campground closures and trail re-locations that are implemented in the Park. These decisions are made to reduce the likelihood of conflict between park users and a bear—perhaps a mother bear with cubs—known to be in the area. Right now bears are frantically feeding in an effort to build adequate fat stores for hibernation. If we want to do something for Banff's bears, we need to give them space to be bears. Select an alternative park trail this afternoon. And make noise, carry bear spray, and be attentive when on the trail.

Running a national park where thousands of daily visitors seek enjoyment and inspiration across thousands of square kilometres of facilities and wilderness isn't cheap. But even Banff National Park, a World Heritage Site and the country's top visitor destination, does not have the funds it needs to do the job right. Want to do something for Banff's grizzly cubs? Support more federal funding for Canada's national parks, and smile when you buy your annual pass or pay your park entrance fee.

In the past five years, eight grizzlies have been killed on the Canadian Pacific tracks (counting these three cubs of the year as mortalities). Most have been attracted to nutritious grain spilled on the rail line. At this moment, grain sprouts in a green carpet between west-bound rails in Banff National Park. Wheat and soybeans dribble onto the tracks from faulty grain car doors and from grain spilled onto the rail cars

during loading. When bears emerge from winter dens and snow covers most natural forage, spilled grain offers a tempting—but potentially deadly—meal. Bears accustomed to finding grain search the tracks—often with their cubs—even though significant amounts of grain may not be present. They are no match for a two-mile long train bound for the coast.

Canadian Pacific Railway has taken steps to address this deadly problem. They have instructed loaders on cleaner procedures and they operate a special vacuum truck to clean up as much spilled grain as possible. Unfortunately, their efforts to date fall far short of what is needed. If Canadians want to prevent the next tragedy of orphaned cubs, we need to urge Canadian Pacific Railway to do whatever is necessary to keep its tracks temptation free.

Finally, Parks Canada also needs to do more to protect grizzlies. Too many bears are dying at human hands in a landscape supposedly dedicated to “ecological integrity.” Banff National Park needs a bona fide and comprehensive grizzly management strategy, complete with contingency plans when grizzly mortality approaches management limits. Banff needs to identify locations and circumstances where grizzlies are most at risk, and to identify—and implement—steps to reduce that risk to tolerable levels. And Canadians need to embrace these needed conservation steps.

Bear 66’s young cubs have been alone for more than two weeks. The abundant berry crop, plus lessons already learned from their mother, are keeping them alive. But likely they are headed back towards Banff, their familiar but dangerous home territory. Highways, railways, roads and other pitfalls add to the obstacles they must overcome. Parks Canada will be tempted to “do something” to keep them alive, and to make us all feel better, at least temporarily. But we have to reconcile ourselves to the sad fact that—barring a miracle—these three cubs will be lost to the Park, either because they have been put into captivity or, because they have lost the battle to survive in their natural habitat.

But other bears, with better prospects, continue to roam our mountain parks. We cannot delay a moment in our collective efforts to do something for them. Banff’s bears deserve a better future.

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