

# Conservation Corner:

## The New Wildlife Paparazzi

By Niki Wilson



**Y**ou're driving down Highway 93 between Jasper and Banff, when you come upon this scene: cars everywhere, people running chaotically about, the route to where you want to go blocked by a motorhome called the *Prowler*. A moment of dread: is it a car accident? No. It's a bear jam.

It's not uncommon to drive around the bend of a highway in one of Alberta's national parks, only to find yourself in some kind of wildlife traffic jam. Bears, elk, sheep, even deer – they all draw the attention of enthusiastic visitors wanting a photo to post to Facebook or show a friend. Although there have always been a few folks that are more aggressive than need be, it appears the incident of roadside harassment may be on the rise.

"Recently, we have been observing a trend of individuals approaching wildlife to a point where it becomes dangerous for both the visitor and the animals," says Steve Young, Public Relations and Communications Officer for Parks Canada. "There have been incidents where food bait has been left for bears and other wildlife just to get a photograph. This habituates the wildlife to food sources that could lead to tragic consequences."

Parks Canada isn't the only one observing the trend. "I see it everyday," says Jasper Tour Company Owner and guide Joe Urie, who's been operating for over a decade in Jasper National Park. He's come upon people throwing rocks at resting bull elk to get them to stand up for photos. He's watched a grizzly chase an elderly man despite repeated warnings (met with a flip of the bird)

from Urie and fellow observers in cars. He's even seen some people approach bears with a camera in one hand and bear spray in the other, willing to risk an encounter to get their shot. "Someone is going to get hurt – it's just a matter of time," says Urie, who's seen more close calls than he can count. And once a bear is provoked to attack, that's usually it for the bear, too.

After years of relatively consistent behaviour in the visiting public, why the change? Urie thinks there are a number of reasons. He's observed a change in the demographic of visitors, noting an increase in tourism from countries like China and India. That would be consistent with Canada's Federal Tourism Strategy that identifies India, China, and Brazil as potential emerging markets, with China being the fastest to grow and most sought



Bear jam, Yellowstone National Park. Photo © Malcolm Manners / Flickr through a Creative Commons license

after. Though Urie is happy to see tourism thrive, he feels an awareness of how to behave around wildlife has not been effectively communicated to new markets.

Young says that Parks Canada has been working hard to maintain natural wary behaviour and ensure the public is well-informed about the consequences of feeding and harassing wildlife. “The Agency has increased our communication efforts and messages on the importance of no feeding wildlife,” says Young. Part of this has been the implementation of the Wildlife Guardians Program, a program Parks Canada says has connected with 80,000 visitors in Jasper National Park alone since 2010.

However, Urie wonders if these communication efforts are overcoming language barriers and other cultural hurdles effectively. He sees busloads of people pull right up to a roadside bear. “The driver lets the entire bus off right beside it,” he says, noting that the guardians don’t have the authority to deal with a public that doesn’t want to follow their suggestions.

As one solution, he suggests perhaps a Qwerty (QR) code could be available to visitors at the park gate and on brochures so that once scanned, information about wildlife could pop up in the language of the user.

The shift in the demographics of visitors to our national parks is one part of a complex issue. Enforcement might be another. While there are provisions in the *Canada National Parks Act* designed to protect wildlife – like fines of up to \$25,000 – we might wonder if Parks Canada has the staff needed to enforce them.

Due to cut backs and increased visitation, Urie suggests Parks Canada officials are overwhelmed by the sheer volume of people at animal jams, or they’re simply not present. “They’re just totally understaffed,” says Urie. Indeed, Federal government cutbacks in 2012 and subsequent staffing adjustments have reduced the number of wildlife-conflict officers in the Mountain Parks block.

Add to that the fact that with social media, people are able to tag and locate wildlife in real time, and you’ve got officials trying to

manage a situation that requires more personnel than they’ve had before.

Tourism is important to local economies, but it’s more than that. If done properly, it can be a vehicle to create connections with, and hopefully protection for, the wild things and spaces visitors come to enjoy. However, to do that properly, new visitors, like those of decades past, need to be educated on how to play their part ahead of time and regulators require the financial and human resources needed to maintain a healthy tourism environment.

With two million visitors expected in a regular year in Jasper National Park alone, and free park passes being offered for all Canadian National Parks in 2017, creating an awareness of how to behave around wildlife is more important than ever. 🐾

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