

Nature Wise, September 2016

Early this summer my wife and I took an RV trip to North Carolina. On past RV trips we had often seen dead animals (road kill) along the highways but this year it seemed like there was more than usual. So for something to do between stops we started counting dead animals. One day we counted nearly 80 animals even though we only tallied those on our side of the highway. The types of animals we saw varied by where we were in our travels – skunks, rabbits, deer and coyotes were fairly common in the north whereas further south possums and armadillos dominated although we saw everything from dead Canada geese to pronghorn antelope. Such a large number of roadkill got me thinking about how many animals are actually killed by road traffic in North America and whether there was any information available on this subject. Well there certainly is a large amount of information available and the numbers are appalling.

We are all familiar with big animal road kill such as seeing a dead deer along the highway; large animal – car collisions are pretty serious accidents with an average of 4 people being killed in BC each year in such collisions. The BC Ministry of Transportation statistics show that almost 10,000 large animals are reported killed on BC roads each year but they believe the actual number is perhaps 3 to 4 times larger with many injured animals wandering off the road to die and thus not being counted. ICBC statistics show that in addition to the deaths about 450 people are injured each year in vehicle – animal collisions. About 80 percent of the animals killed are deer while moose, elk and bear make up most of the remaining 20 percent. Because impacts with small animals like porcupines, rabbits, and skunks, etc. generally cause little or no damage, information on these types of animal deaths are harder to come by.

In the US, the Humane Society has conducted a few studies of road kill and concluded that about 1 million animals a day (that's more than 350 million dead animals per year) are killed by cars, trucks, motorcycles and buses. These animals aren't really killed by the road so we should probably start referring to them as car kill instead of road kill – maybe that would get us thinking more about the terrible toll we extract on our wildlife in our effort to go as fast as possible.

Fortunately there are steps that can be taken to reduce the “car kill” toll. Fencing and underpasses or special bridges seem to work well for both large and small animals. Anyone who has driven the Coquihalla connector (Hwy 97C) from Peachland to Merritt has probably seen the high fencing on both sides of the highway which keeps deer and such off the road and directs the animals to underpasses or bridges so they can safely continue their journey. Banff National Park has 24 vegetated bridges across the Trans-Canada Highway which not only greatly reduces the animal death toll but in effect helps to mitigate the habitat fragmentation caused by the highway. Similar types of fencing and underpasses work well for a great variety of smaller species as well. In one study done in the Mojave Desert in California it was found that fencing and culverting decreased the road mortality amongst the endangered desert tortoise by 93% – a very significant outcome.

On our return journey on Highway 3 from Alberta towards Ft Steele we saw evidence of the latest hi-tech method for preventing large animal collisions. BC Highways has installed animal detectors along two stretches of Highway 3 as a test project – when the system detects an animal near the road a series of lights start blinking to warn motorists to slow down. Let's hope drivers pay more attention than they normally do to such things.

The South Okanagan Naturalists' Club meets the fourth Thursday of each month at 7PM at the Penticton United Church. September's speaker will be talking about the banding of hummingbirds at Princeton and Kaleden. The public is welcome.