

Mountain News: Wolverine takes highway high route

by Allen Best



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Monitoring of the wildlife underpasses and overpasses along the TransCanada Highway in Alberta has shown animals are using the man-made travel corridors.

LAKE LOUISE, Alberta — The TransCanada Highway through Banff National Park now has six overpasses created specifically to allow safe passage by wildlife. But until last November, no wolverine had ever used one. They had used the smaller, narrower underpasses. But not those with the more scenic views.

How do they know, and why does it matter?

Both overpasses and underpasses are monitored by cameras, which record the passage of wildlife big enough to trigger the cameras. More than 200,000 crossings of grizzly and black bears, elk and other animals have been recorded.

It matters because, according to conservation biologists, wildlife species — like humans — fare best when they can roam a bit. Too much isolation weakens the genetic pool and makes those isolated populations more vulnerable to disease. Think of an inter-related family in a small town.

But the overpasses have been around for more than a decade. Why did it take one so long to use it?

"We don't know a lot about wolverines, but we do know there's a learning curve, which we've seen for grizzly bears and black bears as well," explains Tony Clevenger, a wildlife research biologist with the Western Transportation Institute. He notes that half of the 10 documented crossings — all but one in underpasses — have occurred in the last two years.

By whatever means, these crossings are good news, Clevenger told the *Rocky Mountain Outlook*. "Any time a wolverine crosses a highway is cause for celebration. Highways are fragmenters of habitat, and any time you can get across is good for the species."

Tree-well death still sparks questions

REVELSTOKE, B.C. — Exceptional snow

poses an exceptional snow-riding danger: falling headfirst into a tree well or, for that matter, into a deep pile of snow.

Both happened last winter as nine people died in the United States and at least two more in British Columbia, among them Evan Donald.

In a lengthy article, *The Revelstoke Times Review* explains that Donald, who was 23 when he died, had grown up in New Brunswick and dreamed of moving to British Columbia and enjoying the backcountry. He succeeded, and worked at an inn that provided lodging for helicopter skiers. When a spare seat on a helicopter opened up, he jumped.

What exactly happened has never been publicly divulged. Canadian Mountain Holidays many years ago adopted a buddy system because of the danger of tree-well inversions. For some reason, the system failed that day. Customers didn't all have radios, either, although they do now. When his body was finally found, Donald was still alive but unconscious. He later died at a hospital.

The Times Review spoke with the victim's brother, Trevor Donald, who points to a largely self-regulated heli-skiing industry needing government regulation. He also shared frustrations with trying to find out what went wrong.

Police have been of little or no help. The Revelstoke RCMP didn't respond to a request for an interview, and because the investigation is still ongoing after almost a year, no coroner's report has been issued.

The Times Review spoke with Rob Rohn, director of mountain operations for CMH and also president of an industry association called Helicat Canada. Rohn, reports the *Times Review*, sees no value in government oversight. Although risk is inherent, prevention is the first order of business.

"The worst thing possible for our