

Rare photo of lynx using Banff highway overpass delights wildlife experts

‘It was like he was posing for us’

BY VALERIE FORTNEY, CALGARY HERALD APRIL 12, 2012

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This unique image, captured by motion-sensitive cameras, offers an extraordinary glimpse of an animal that many Canadians have never seen. A Canada lynx uses the Redearth Creek wildlife overpass to cross the Trans-Canada Highway in Banff National Park at 8:34 a.m. on March 28, 2012. Since 1996, over 200,000 animals, including grizzlies, wolves and cougars, have safely crossed the highway using wildlife overpasses and underpasses.

Photograph by: Courtesy, Highwaywilding.org, Handout

He weighs in at up to 14 kilograms, but thanks to his enormous feet shaped almost like snowshoes, looks as though he is floating on air as he ambles along the snow.

His legs are long and powerful, his coat is thick and grey, and the patches of fur that frame his face look like the kind of beard sported by aristocrats.

When Trevor Kinley opened up his e-mail earlier this week, he saw the subject heading "A Little Morning Surprise" and the photograph of the majestic beast.

"You can't help but be struck by how beautiful it is," says Kinley of the March 28 photograph of the animal known as the Canadian lynx.

"I've only had a glimpse of one in the wild, so to capture such a clear image is a rare treat."

What was an even bigger treat for Kinley, a biologist and road ecologist for Parks Canada, is the precise location for the photograph: the Redearth Creek overpass in Banff National Park, just a few kilometres up the road from the Sunshine Village ski area.

The overpass is one of six that are part of the wildlife-crossing project in Banff National Park.

Combined with 38 underpasses along the stretch of Trans-Canada Highway that cuts through this wildlife-rich area, the intent of the crossings is to keep the number of animal deaths on the highway to an absolute minimum, thus ensuring that nature's balance is retained.

Started in 1996, the project has included not only the building of animal crossings throughout the park, but also the ongoing monitoring of their effectiveness.

For years, the way researchers kept tabs on usage was through old-fashioned tracking of animal prints.

In recent years, motion-sensitive cameras have filled in much more effectively.

"The remote cameras are left there for weeks at a time," says Kinley.

Every three weeks or so, someone goes in and retrieves the data from the cameras and reviews them.

"Most of the time, we see bears, deer, elk," he says.

But this time, there it was — a National Geographic-worthy image of the elusive Canadian lynx.

This is partly due, Kinley notes, to the relatively lower numbers of the species in the park. Estimates are only in the dozens for this animal that prefers to roam in high evergreen forests.

The other reason is that the majority of the lynx that call Banff National Park home prefer the environs around Lake Louise, where the latest passes have only recently been ready for use.

"You'll find more bears east, more lynx west," Kinley says.

Add to that the fact that lynx have proven to be more wary of the passes than other wildlife — "their learning curve appears to be much higher," says Kinley — makes for only the most rare of sightings even for those who spend their time tracking animals.

"It was like he was posing for us," says Tony Clevenger of the March 28 photograph. "It's like he's floating on top of the snow — it's really compelling."

Like Kinley, Clevenger, who works with the Western Transportation Institute, is also excited about it, but for other reasons.

"Now, we can start to study more closely what they respond to, and look at such factors as crossing dimension and fencing," says Clevenger, who is one of the world's foremost roadway ecology experts.

"It is going to be an exciting time for us, to get a much better understanding of this particular animal."

A research collaboration between Parks Canada and the Miistakis Institute, the monitoring project is one that has caught the attention of conservationists around the world.

Its hefty price tag — wildlife mitigation measures are estimated to account for nearly one-third of the \$310-million cost of the Trans-Canada Highway twinning project from Castle Junction to the B.C. border alone — and other aspects of the 15-year project have met with some controversy.

But those in the field say there's no denying that Banff National Park now serves as a model for effective management of human-wildlife conflict.

Over the past few years, Clevenger has worked with groups in Colorado and Washington state that use the Banff model: "I always call Banff the only laboratory in the world where we can do this research."

While the successes accumulate, it's still a rare treat for those devoted to their preservation to see the Canadian lynx in its grand, natural state.

"I've been doing this research for more than 15 years, and that's probably the best image I've seen of a lynx," says Clevenger. "I'm looking forward to seeing more in the future."

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