

Calgary - An image of a deer fraternizing with two sandhill cranes snapped by a tree-mounted camera in the Crowsnest Pass is compelling on its own, says conservationist Sean Feagan.

But photographs documenting the number and movement of animals could be more important in determining how collisions between them and humans in the wildlife-rich corridor in southwest Alberta can be reduced, he said.

"It is one of the hot spots for wildlife-vehicle collisions and that goes beyond impacting animals - it causes headaches and heartaches for people, too," said Feagan, spokesman for the Nature Conservancy of Canada. "We're trying to understand that better."

Traffic has increased on Highway 3 due to construction at Kicking Horse Pass along the Trans-Canada Highway, said Feagan. "There have been a lot of animal collisions there."

Researchers say there are about 150 wildlife collisions with vehicles or trains each year between Lundbreck and the B.C. border, with the actual number likely much higher.

The conservancy and Miistakis Institute have mounted 37 motion-activated cameras in an area between Coleman and Crowsnest Lake, recording thousands of animal appearances in the past year. The most common are white-tail deer and elk, but cougars, moose, grizzly and black bears, foxes and **wolves** have also triggered the cameras.

A bridge over the Crowsnest River on Highway 3 and a rail underpass have emerged as trouble spots that could be reconfigured to ease the transit of wildlife, said Feagan.

The study found most mammals shied away from using narrow, corrugated metal culverts to cross beneath the highway.

"We could make the existing structures safer. Is there any way to mitigate that railway underpass and to enhance culverts to make them more usable by wild animals?" he said, adding CP Rail has collaborated with the study.

Regularly scheduled upgrades to the infrastructure could allow that kind of work, and federal grants exist for such mitigation, added Feagan.

He said animal overpasses along the Trans-Canada Highway in Banff National Park have reduced wildlife collisions by more than 80 per cent. A \$17.5-million overpass and 12 kilometres of fencing are now being constructed at Highway 1 east of Canmore near Lac Des Arcs.

"There's been wildlife fencing installed (on Highway 3 in the Crowsnest Pass) to limit wildlife movement but there are gaps," said Feagan.

People and livestock are also captured by the cameras, said Tracy Lee, director of conservation research with the Miistakis Institute.

"It shows that this is a working landscape, there's co-existence happening," she said. "But if we want to continue to see these healthy (wildlife) populations, we have to invest and sometimes help them."

The province says at least 50 per cent of vehicle collisions on rural highways in Alberta involve animals and that, on average, five people die every year in such accidents.

In 2015, the government said the annual cost of those collisions may have surpassed \$280 million.

The conservancy and institute are planning to continue its Crowsnest Pass camera survey for another two years. BKaufmann@postmedia.com Twitter: @BillKaufmanjrn

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