

# Too Close for Comfort

How human contact is driving wildlife conflicts in BC



by Lynne Fedorick

**In November 2025, a school hike near Bella Coola BC ended in trauma when a mother grizzly and two cubs emerged from the forest and attacked a group of 20 students and teachers having lunch on the trail.**

Eleven people were injured in the chaos. The attack stopped only when teachers used bear spray and bear bangers to drive the animals off. Three students and one adult sustained critical injuries, while seven others were treated at the scene. A search for the bears responsible led to the

capture of eight grizzlies who were DNA tested and released in a remote wilderness area. The search was called off, but fear and uncertainty remain.

## Warnings and worries

The incident has intensified concerns about the growing population of grizzlies on the north end of Vancouver Island, with a family of bears living near Sayward since summer of 2024, and individual bears spotted as far south as Campbell River. Although Vancouver Island's griz-

zly population is estimated at less than 20 bears, the Bella Coola attack signals looming issues with animals becoming more habituated to human presence.

Grizzly attacks are still a rarity in BC's long history of human-bear coexistence. Bear biologists point out that as a rule, grizzlies are shy and usually go out of their way to avoid human interaction. However, 2025's province-wide total of eight reported grizzly attacks more than doubled the total reported attacks in 2024.

Biologists and conservation officers have long warned that human proximity changes bear behaviour and creates habituation, especially when no meaningful deterrents are used. Too often, human proximity results in animals that lose their innate fear of humans. Habituation becomes an even bigger problem when bears connect the presence of humans with food. This creates a conditioned behavioural response that drives bears to seek out humans as an opportunity for an easy, high calorie meal. It's at this juncture in our relationship with bears that things can end badly for humans and bears alike.

### When fear and fascination collide

In northern Vancouver Island and the Central Coast, wildlife tourism and recreation are booming. The increased presence of humans in traditional feeding areas puts grizzlies and other wildlife species at risk. Wildlife-watching tours seek out areas where patrons can get close enough to bears and other wild animals to get Instagram-worthy photo ops.

The waters surrounding Vancouver Island are among the most heavily trafficked marine wildlife viewing areas on the Pacific coast. Wildlife-watching tour operators crowd critical marine corridors; kayakers and drones hover near shorelines and whale pods for hours at a time. Record numbers of vessel strikes on whales and sea lions suggest these animals are becoming so accustomed to boats that they have lost their fear of them.

Humans used to avoid grizzlies. Now they seek bears out to watch them feeding. The bears, for their part, are becoming so accustomed to the presence of humans that they aren't hiding from them anymore. Increased bear, whale, and other wildlife sightings aren't necessarily a sign of healthy coexistence – instead,

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they often reflect desensitization to nearby human activities.

British Columbia has regulations designed to minimize wildlife disturbance and reduce conflicts between humans and wild animals, but enforcement is under-resourced and often falls short.

With around 200 conservation officers covering 3.1 million hectares, there are few resources for preventing conflicts between humans and animals. The end result is that conservation enforcement is almost always a reaction to harm that's already been done rather than prevention of conflicts between wildlife and humans.

Since the Bella Coola attack, urgent questions are being raised about wildlife management frameworks, including calls from some quarters to revisit policies like the grizzly bear hunting ban. But simplistic population-reduction solutions fail to address the complex dynamics of increasing human intrusion into wild spaces.

### A new measure of care

More humans than ever before are going into grizzly habitats for forestry, industry, and recreation. Logging roads and hiking trails are providing unprecedented access to areas that were once pristine wilderness. These access points make it easier for bears to meander their way into conflicts with humans. Their constant search for food can take them 30 km in a day. A 300 kg bear finds it much easier to wander down a logging road or trail than

traverse dense forest, and from a grizzly bear's perspective, these routes are perfect places to find food. Sometimes their curiosity is rewarded with goodies like roadside litter, game carcasses, and easy-to-access garbage cans, inviting further exploration into human-inhabited areas.

Humans have become a familiar feature of the environment for normally-shy grizzlies. These bears have a keen sense of smell and can detect scents up to a mile away. So even when grizzly bear tours (or individuals) stay the mandated 100 meters away, the bears are still well aware of their presence while they feed along shorelines.

The grizzly attack near Bella Coola is a shocking wake-up call that something is amiss in the relationship between humans and animals in the wild. If our love for wildlife is more than a love of photo opportunities, it must evolve into a form of respect that accepts necessary boundaries. At the very least, that means eliminating attractants, offering plenty of space, and avoiding wild animals entirely instead of seeing them as an opportunity to take a photo that could go viral. Above all, we need to understand that no matter what the species, wild animals owe us nothing – least of all a close-up photo or a video of a daring encounter on a trail.

Lynne Fedorick is a Canadian journalist and freelance writer whose work has been featured in a variety of international magazines.