

Wildlife Crossing Implementation in the GYE of Montana

Abstract:

The GYE is known for its vast landscape and thriving and diverse wildlife. It attracts millions of visitors a year to visit YNP and the surrounding areas, including the fastest growing micropolitan area in the U.S., Bozeman, MT. More growth and development in our communities and a rapidly expanding tourism and recreation economy are contributing to increases in traffic volumes and wildlife-vehicle conflicts, including both wildlife-vehicle collisions (WVCs) as well as the barrier effect of roads on wildlife movement. In this panel session we will explore how building diverse and meaningful partnerships, taking an interdisciplinary approach, utilizing citizen science and engagement, and using cutting-edge data analysis and tools are allowing us to identify and plan for solutions to reduce WVCs and help maintain habitat connectivity that is critical to the survival of Yellowstone's iconic wildlife.

There are two main highways that provide access to the northern entrances to YNP, US191, and US89. These highways bisect important wildlife habitat and movement corridors and experience extremely high rates of WVCs. Currently, 24% of all crashes on Highway 191 and 50% of all crashes on Highway 89 involve wildlife; that is 5 and 10 times the national average respectively. To address this conflict, local partnerships have been formed to coordinate with NGO, University, Agency, and community partners to collect, compile and analyze data, increase community education and engagement, and ultimately develop comprehensive fine-scale assessments of these two highways to identify and prioritize wildlife crossing structures and other actions to reduce wildlife-vehicle collisions and maintain or improve permeability across these highways.

Reducing wildlife-vehicle conflicts has also been an increasing priority at the statewide level. In 2019, the Montana Wildlife and Transportation Partnership (MWTP) was formed to begin working towards solutions for the state. MWTP includes representatives from Montana Department of Transportation (MDT), Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks (FWP), and a coalition of NGOs called Montanans for Safe Wildlife Passage. In 2023 MWTP released a statewide planning tool as well as an application process to advance wildlife crossing projects outside of other major transportation improvement projects. This application process allows wildlife crossing projects to be proposed and then potentially selected to receive funds to conduct engineering feasibility studies, the first step in moving a project from concept to construction.

We propose that this session be a moderated panel discussion where we will hear from representatives of the partnerships focused on US 191 and US 89 (Liz Fairbank and Blakeley Adkins) as well as the statewide MWTP (Deb Wambach – FWP and Tom Martin- MDT) to understand how these statewide and regional efforts are working to advance wildlife crossing projects across the state and in the GYE. If this cannot be a panel discussion, than we propose 3 separate podium presentations: One focused on the [US191 Assessment](#) and next steps, one focused on the Yellowstone Safe Passage Partnership and the [US89 Assessment](#), and one focused on the statewide MWTP.