STOP MY CAR ON A WINDSWEPT SHOULDER OF THE busy four-lane Trans-Canada Highway a few kilometres west of where Alberta’s Bow and Kananaskis rivers converge. I’m not far from Highway 40 to Kananaskis Country, and the exit to Highway 1A, the Bow Valley Trail. As a parade of cars and transport trucks speed by, I feel the ground shudder and shake. I park far off by the ditch and climb a sun-drenched hill. Looking east, there are rolling foothills that stretch to Calgary an hour away; to the west, near and into the distance, there’s a seemingly impenetrable wall of mountains, carpeted green with spruce and pine, interrupted by jagged cliffs where trees cannot grow. Everything gets pinched through narrow gaps between these towering peaks—the converging highways, the towns and villages they connect, and the busy cross-country railway that transports goods to and from far-flung communities and ports on the coast. Wildlife habitat is wedged in here as well, strung along the gentler slopes, as animals try to follow their ancient pathways along the river.

The animals here, as everywhere, are constantly on the move, searching for food and mates and places to rear their young. That’s why the Alberta government is considering a wildlife overpass right where I’m standing—an area dubbed Bow Valley Gap by local conservationists—roughly 20 kilometres outside the Banff National Park gates. Proponents say the overpass would reduce the number of wildlife-vehicle collisions here and would give roaming elk, wolves, grizzly bears and other animals safe passage across a highway that averages roughly 22,000 vehicles a day.

About 20,000 people live in the Bow Valley, mostly in the Banff townsite and nearby Canmore, and roughly four million tourists, nature lovers, hikers, skiers and backcountry adventure seekers visit every year. “We’ve got two of the biggest protected areas in Alberta—Banff and
Kananaskis — and a city of more than a million people an hour away,” says Jay Honeyman, a human-wildlife conflict biologist for Alberta Environment and Parks. “It’s a very, very busy place — some say it’s pie-in-the-sky to think that wildlife would want to live here, but so far, they have.”

There’s more than a century behind efforts to conserve wildlife in these ecosystems — including in neighbouring national parks Kootenay, Yoho and Jasper — and it’s been honed by extensive scientific research focused on that mandate. In some ways, the Bow Valley is like a long-term experiment at the ecosystem scale that will prove whether or not we can keep wildlife healthy and thriving amid all this human activity.

“As animals adapt, we adapt too and try to find that balance,” says Honeyman, whose job is to proactively prevent dangerous wildlife encounters throughout the region. “In the Bow Valley, we’ve shown that these things are achievable.” But he’s quick to add the challenges are not going away — if anything, they’re more acute than ever.

Successful co-existence with wildlife, he says, requires a range of planning efforts — from highway fencing and wildlife crossing structures, to bear-proof garbage bins and education programs that help raise awareness and minimize negative interactions between wildlife and people.

There’s a long history of such initiatives in the Bow Valley, which is why it’s considered a world leader in wildlife management. Within Banff’s park boundaries along the Trans-Canada Highway, there are more than 80 kilometres of fencing, 38 underpasses and six large overpasses. Studies show they reduce wildlife collisions by 80 per cent, which is why they’re now being replicated worldwide.

With similar foresight, municipal planners in Banff and Canmore vowed to clean up their garbage systems, which for years had attracted scavenging wildlife. “Bears used to rummage around in town dumps all the time,” says Stephen Herrero, former professor of animal behaviour and ecology, and author of *Bear Attacks: Their Causes and Avoidance*.

Within Banff’s park boundaries there are 80 kilometres of fencing, 38 underpasses and six large overpasses. Studies show they reduce wildlife collisions by 80 per cent. Still more to be done. Within Banff’s park boundaries there are 80 kilometres of fencing, 38 underpasses and six large overpasses. Studies show they reduce wildlife collisions by 80 per cent.

Herrero, whose research observing bears led to the innovative bear-proof garbage bin design used in the Bow Valley today. Both towns have done away with curbside pickup as well, ensuring no overnight garbage attractants.

The garbage systems, just like the crossing structures, are true success stories in wildlife management, having virtually erased what was once an endemic problem. “A lot of other areas inside national parks have the same quality of garbage systems, but those places are dedicated to wildlife conservation,” says Herrero. “Canmore is probably the best for a non-protected area anywhere in North America.”

The success is obvious. It’s clear that animals still thrive here. Dense forest surrounds local neighbourhoods, carnivores stalk their prey on the outskirts of town, and herds of elk often congregate on grassy school grounds.

But although wildlife in and around towns may seem unique and positive, it can also be dangerous — especially when big mammals like grizzly bears and elk are involved.

In many cases, though, it’s human behaviour that is unpredictable and hard to control — both within and outside town limits, and even in protected areas reserved strictly for wildlife. As local populations grow and visits increase, “people are everywhere, even on little game trails, and they’re now hiking and jogging at night as well,” says Melanie Percy, a senior ecologist with Alberta Parks, Kananaskis region. “Wildlife often use these areas at night to avoid humans, but now there’s suddenly people there.”

Percy was on the steering committee for a two-year human use management review process in Canmore. They used dozens of remote cameras to track what was actually going on in those wildlife corridors and habitat patches. What the cameras showed, she says, was rampant human use throughout, often involving off-leash dogs in areas reserved for wildlife. The two-year review concluded in 2015 with a series of recommendations for addressing the issues, including more visitor information and education, better trail signage and increased enforcement of dog rules and other regulations.

The problem, says Percy, is that if people don’t comply with these regulations and restrictions, wildlife will continue to be pushed out and negative encounters will become more frequent. “We need to get through to the recreationists and others who are using the land,” she says. “We need to do it before we lose the opportunities for co-existence we have left.”

Those kinds of challenges are difficult to navigate in Canmore. Although surrounded by park land, it’s not actually within park boundaries, unlike Banff, which means there’s no mandate or requirement to look out for the interests of wildlife. Everything that’s been done so far, or will be done in the future, is due to the good intentions and hard work of local citizens and officials who recognize how valuable it is to live with wildlife.

“There’s a lot of collaborative effort that goes into making this work,” says Jay Honeyman. “But we’re at the point now where we need to do more.” One of the biggest challenges, he says, is the constant change in Canmore, which has seen enormous growth over the last 30 years. “Animals are going places they used to go and finding a condominium complex or a schoolyard,” he says. “They’re just constantly having to adapt.” And adapting can be difficult when wildlife is managed in different ways depending on the jurisdiction — there may be one set of rules in a park, but a completely different set of rules in a neighbouring municipality.

“IN CANMORE, DENSE FOREST SURROUNDS NEIGHBOURHOODS, CARNIVORES STALK PREY, AND ELK CONGREGATE ON SCHOOL GROUNDS. IT IS UNIQUE... AND POTENTIALLY DANGEROUS”

STILL MORE TO BE DONE
That’s very confusing to a carnivore,” says Honeyman. “One animal in particular, a grizzly bear, will often eat different things depending on what’s available. It’s completely unpredictable.”

In July 2017, that contradiction played out in the national media, when a female grizzly bear in the Bow Valley, known as Bear 148, bluffed a few joggers and hikers in a popular recreation area on the south side of Canmore, where she and other bears were feasting on buffalo berries. The six-year-old collared bear was trapped and relocated to a remote area in northwest Alberta, Kakwa Wildland Park. She soon left the protected area...
In a 2016 study on grizzly bears, the Stoney Tribal Administration provided a blueprint for how that could happen. Focusing specifically on Galatea Creek in the Kananaskis Valley—a traditional Stoney hunting and gathering location and also known as prime grizzly bear habitat—the study first gleaned local knowledge and perspectives from Stoney Elders about the region, based on personal experience and stories passed down over generations. With that as context, the next phase involved field observations, or “cultural monitoring,” throughout the busy recreational area, which were incorporated into a final report.

Snow says the study aimed to increase understanding of how human activities affect grizzly bears in the region and to identify opportunities for improving conservation and management. “We wanted to change management practices, and we wrote the report with that in mind,” he says. “If we just keep doing the same things we’ve always been doing, then grizzly bears are going to keep being frustrated by people coming into their areas during their time of the year.”

The report concluded with six recommendations, including a call for keeping people away from Galatea Creek for a period in early August every year—a very important time for grizzly bears, because of berry season. “There’s a reason grizzly bears keep coming back to Galatea Creek year after year, and they’re going to keep coming back—that’s our cultural understanding,” says Snow. “Closing off that area for two weeks a year is not too much to ask. We should be able to share this landscape with wildlife.”

Snow hopes to do similar studies for species and ecosystems in the Bow Valley and elsewhere, including a cultural study related to the recent historic bison reintroduction in Banff National Park—an initiative the Stoney Nakoda supported along with other Indigenous communities across western North America. “We’re not saying we want to take away from the science—we just want to add a traditional knowledge component,” says Snow, arguing that local knowledge is often a missing piece in planning. “Right in our own backyard, we’re not employing perhaps the most critical part,” he says, referring to many generations of accumulated knowledge of the ecosystem and its wildlife.

The Stoney report also called for increased wildlife connectivity and crossing structures throughout Kananaskis and the Bow Valley—as far as possible from other developments, such as industrial activities, campgrounds and trails. That recommendation, says Snow, was based on the recognition, shared by biologists, that wildlife management will only be successful by taking the whole ecosystem into account.

Standing on the elevated hill at Bow Valley Gap, at the site of the proposed overpass over the Trans-Canada Highway, you get a clear view of the importance of wildlife connectivity. Not only would an overpass here reduce wildlife-vehicle collisions, it would also enable movement of grizzly bears and other wildlife making their way between Kananaskis and Banff National Park and beyond. “The Bow Valley is one of four or five key linkage zones for wildlife along the mountains that stretch from about Yellowstone National Park all the way to the Yukon,” says Stephen Legault, Alberta director for Canmore-based Yellowstone to Yukon Conservation Initiative, a trans-boundary organization. “An investment in wildlife connectivity here has payoff not just for the Bow Valley and Alberta, but for that entire chain of mountains.”

Legault says the overpass would be an essential part of a long-term plan to keep grizzly bears and other iconic wildlife thriving in the Bow Valley. “We have to look at this in an integrated way,” he says, “You can’t separate connectivity from development pressures and all other factors. That certainly makes things more complex, but this world is complex and requires complex solutions.”

For wildlife managers like Jay Honeyman, that’s the next big challenge—to work collaboratively across multiple jurisdictions and departments to manage at the full ecosystem scale. And that necessarily means management decisions that look 50 or 100 years down the road.

“We’ve been very successful at living with wildlife so far,” says Honeyman, and that’s why the Bow Valley has lessons to share with communities around the world. “It’s been described by some bear biologists as one of the busiest landscapes where grizzly bears continue to exist.” But it’s also true that significant development in the valley seems inevitable for years to come, he adds. How this complex coexistence is handled will dictate whether the extraordinary wildlife that still thrives here will remain into the future.

“That’s what we’re trying to do with this roundtable,” he says. “We’re drilling down a little deeper to find out where we go from here. The story’s not over; there’s still lots for us to do.”

Canmore writer Fraser Los has been nominated for three National Magazine Awards for his feature articles on nature and on wildlife conservation.