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UNSAFE PASSAGE

Portions of Interstate 90 have become deadly ground for both animals and drivers

Officials are looking at ways to warn travelers and establish corridors for wildlife to cross

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NINEMILE – Cruising by at 75 mph, most drivers likely don't notice the well-worn trail winding its way onto the edge of Interstate 90.

They certainly don't see the five whitetail carcasses in various stages of decay hidden away in the borrow pit within a stone's throw of the big Ninemile exit sign.

And it would take a pair of sharp eyes to spot the upturned earth and glittering pieces of chrome that mark the beginning of an accident that claimed the life of a pair of travelers recently.

Locals call this spot at the base of Cayuse Hill the "hit zone." Some call it the "kill zone."

Eleanor Danesh, a longtime Ninemile area resident, knows all about the carnage at Cayuse Hill. For years, she and others have been working to get the state highway department to take notice.

Danesh has seen the dead deer and elk

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Eleanor Danesh, right, and Kim Davitt talk about the wildlife crossing at Cayuse Hill near the Ninemile Road exit. The site is known locally as the "hit zone" due to the number of animals killed there each year.

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scattered about the road. Last fall, three black bears died trying to cross the road here in a six-week period. Many years ago, one of the original Ninemile wolves was killed nearby.

Recently, Danesh gathered up the remains of a bald eagle likely hit after it gorged on a meal of road kill and put them under a nearby tree.

"I've lived in the Ninemile area for 35 years and that spot has been a wipeout for animals the whole time," she said.

Two weeks ago, Danesh was on her way home from Missoula after spending a day talking about Cayuse Hill and other local wildlife crossings with a variety of folks when she slowed to a stop on Interstate 90 just before Cayuse Hill.

Up the road a bit were flashing blue lights. She left her car and walked up to talk with the Highway Patrol. That's when she spotted the Chevrolet Suburban upside down on the end of a concrete barrier. A dead whitetail deer doe and it's nearly full-term fawn were sprawled on the road nearby.

The accident killed Kathy Grundhauser, 50, of Washington state and her mother, Lena Johnson, 71, of Butte.

The accident occurred at about 4 p.m. when the Suburban swerved to avoid hitting the deer and rolled 3 1/2 times.

Ironically, the Montana Department of Transportation had just recently agreed to post wildlife crossing signs near the site.

"After spending years asking for something, anything to be done, we'd finally received word that the signs had been ordered and they'd be put up sometime later this summer," Danesh said. "Seven days later, we have this horrible crash."

Danesh is one of the founding members of Nine Mile Wildlife Crossing Group, a task force of mostly local residents working to find solutions to the bottleneck that I-90 creates for wildlife.

They've worked with the state DOT to realign fencing under a pair of I-90 bridges just downstream from Cayuse Hill. They've installed movement-sensing cameras in strategic spots to capture photographs of animals making use of key crossing points. And they're looking at other options that can provide some semblance of safety for both human and wildlife on I-90.

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– Chris Servheen, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service

The Ninemile area is one of a number of important corridors for migrating wildlife.

"It's an important link between the Northern Continental Divide ecosystem and the Salmon-Selway wilderness areas," said Kim Davitt, a conservation program coordinator with American Wildlands. "Keeping these linkage zones is critical for lots of different wildlife species."

The corridors wildlife need to be able to move from one secure island of habitat to another are threatened by a variety of different human activities, including subdivisions, increased recreational use and more cars on the road.

The toll highways have on wildlife is astounding. It's estimated that one million animals are killed every day trying to get from one side of the highway to the other.

"When you consider that traffic is moving along between 70 and 80 mph on the interstate, it gives you only a matter of seconds to get out of the way when you hear someone approaching," said Chris Servheen of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. "We know to listen. Wildlife doesn't."

All you have to do is go stand next to the interstate sometime and you'll get a feeling of how vulnerable animals are," he said. "And to make matters worse, most are trying to cross at night when they can be blinded by huge bright headlights."

Traffic along I-90 between Missoula and the Idaho border is increasing, especially the large commercial semi-trailer trucks driving through after dark, Servheen said.

"On average, there's between 7,000 to 7,500 vehicles using that portion of the interstate," he said. "It's a significant amount of traffic, especially when you take into account the commercial aspect."

All you have to do is take a look at how many of those big trucks have heavy animal guards," Servheen said. "It gives you an idea of how often they hit animals. With those guards, it doesn't matter what they hit. They certainly can't swerve when they're traveling 80 mph."

In many places, wildlife not only face the challenge of crossing four lanes of traffic, they also have to contend with 52-inch-high concrete barriers commonly called Jersey rails.

"They're highly lethal to animals that are small, like bears, coyotes and lynx," Servheen said. "They can't see over them and it's hard for them to climb over. Their natural response is to walk along the barrier and that's not the best place for them to be when people are driving by at 80 mph."

By far, deer take the largest hit along the nation's highways, but sensitive species like wolverine, wolves and grizzly bears aren't immune.

Heavily traveled interstate highways not only kill wildlife making a run for the other side, they also lead to habitat fragmentation that limits genetic exchange, Servheen said.

Servheen recently completed a study looking at how black bears relate to Highway 93. He tracked 18 collared bears over a two-year period. The study found that wild bears rarely crossed the highway.

The bears willing to navigate the blacktop were often the same ones getting into mischief around people's homes.

"Those bears and their offspring that get into trouble will not survive," Servheen said. "Wild bears are the future and we need to make sure they have an opportunity to travel from one side of the highway to the other."

It could be that black bear populations are already becoming genetically isolated," he said. "We know that while grizzly bears have crossed the interstate, it's not something that happens very often."

While wildlife crossings played an important role in current reconstruction work occurring on Highway 93, it's not a simple matter to retrofit busy roads like I-90.

"When I-90 was constructed 20 to 25 years ago, no one was taking wildlife in consideration," Servheen said. "No one expects the interstate to be rebuilt for wildlife now. We do need to monitor the situation and do what we can, when we can."

For instance, when bridges are reconstructed, there are techniques that can be used to make the underpass more wildlife friendly.

Pat Basting, the Montana Department of Transportation's Missoula District biologist, said the agency is working to address the issue of wildlife crossings in a variety of ways, including public awareness campaigns, working with local citizen groups to identify crossings, and incorporating that knowledge into both reconstruction and new construction projects.

"Our primary mission is to provide a safe and effective transportation system," Basting said. "We try to figure out ways to do that that's also wildlife friendly."

Addressing wildlife issues along I-90 is a challenge just because of the sheer volume of traffic, he said.

"If you try to do any type of construction, it creates delays and detours. Logistically, it becomes very challenging," Basting said. "Cost-wise, it's huge."

The state is working with different citizen groups to find creative ways to address wildlife issues, he said.

At Lolo Pass, it is testing the effectiveness of a variety of signs marking important moose crossings, including some painted directly on the highway. An experimental composting facility to deal with road kill has been established near Victor. Next year, a wildlife overpass and underpass will be constructed near Salmon Lake.

"We do have a lot of things going on in western Montana," Basting said.

It's the wise thing to do not only for wildlife, but also for the people traveling along Montana's highways.

"Hitting an animal at 80 mph is real hazardous to your health and your family's," Servheen said. "When you're traveling that fast, you have seconds to decide how to react."

"I know that every night there are animals looking for a way to cross the highway," he said. "There are some places that I slow down and watch for them. I know where those crossings are, but most people don't and that's the problem."

Wildlife crossings along Interstate 90 can take many forms, including underpasses or bridges. The Montana Department of Transportation works with local groups like Eleanor Danesh's Nine Mile Wildlife Crossing Group to explore different options.