Together for Wildlife HCTF Conservation Scholarship
Recipient 2025

Melissa Butynski

Melissa is a Doctorate candidate attending the University of British Columbia. Her research is examining two key issues. The first is organizing a wildlife crossing and corridors forum to bring together various stakeholder groups to align on management strategies, braiding together Traditional Knowledge and Western science. The second focus is using camera traps to determine factors that influence the use of wildlife crossings.

Maintaining safe pathways for wildlife to move across the landscape is crucial for keeping populations healthy, especially with the challenges posed by climate change. However, roads and highways can create major barriers, cutting through important habitats and fragmenting the landscapes that wildlife rely on to survive. To address this issue, wildlife crossing structures like overpasses and underpasses, paired with fencing, are increasingly used to reduce wildlife-vehicle collisions and restore habitat connectivity.

Melissa's research takes a two-part approach to support connectivity conservation in British Columbia's Southern Interior. First, she is organizing a Wildlife Crossings and Corridors Forum in June 2025. This forum will bring together First Nations, scientists, planners, and decision-makers to identify shared priorities and map out where future efforts, like new crossings or targeted research, should be focused. This forum is a key opportunity to center Indigenous leadership and integrate Traditional Ecological Knowledge with Western science.

Alongside the forum, she is leading a field-based camera trap study to better understand how animals interact with existing crossing structures. While many studies focus on animals that successfully use these structures, fewer examine individuals that hesitate, turn back, or try multiple times before crossing. Her study will document these behaviors to identify factors like noise or traffic that can hinder successful use. Together, this work aims to support practical conservation decisions and help ensure that future crossings are built in the right places, for the right species, and with the greatest benefit to both wildlife and communities.

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