

Toadlet Tsunami Strikes Vancouver Island Inland Highway

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In mid-August, the Vancouver Island Inland Highway (Highway 19) was struck unexpectedly by a tsunami of western toadlets near Pup Creek, north of Courtenay. Over a million toadlets, hatching in two swampy locations on the east side of the highway, began to migrate west across the highway.

The migration was first noticed on August 17th by Elke Wind, one of British Columbia's leading amphibian experts, while she was driving north to work with the Ministry on improvements to amphibian fencing located further up the highway. Without warning, waves of western toadlets had begun migrating west across a stretch of a four lane, 110km/hr section of the highway.

Although many other toad crossing locations along the highway had been identified during the 1990s by extensive pre-construction environmental impact assessments and mitigated with amphibian fencing and tunnels, there had been no indication that toads were present where the migration was occurring. As a consequence, the toadlet migration was occurring at a location which had no amphibian fencing or passage structures.

The toadlet migration was unprecedented in Ministry history. On the first day, hundreds of toadlets at a crossing site that stretched approximately two kilometres along the highway. The following day, the number found jumped to about 10,000. Each subsequent day, as the mass migration continued, the numbers grew rapidly. Never before, had the Ministry experienced an amphibian migration of such magnitude.

Fortunately for the Ministry, and especially the toadlets, Elke was available to provide extremely timely, professional advice on dealing with the creatures. Following Elke's



suggestions, Lynda Fyfe, an environmental contractor, and Kate Paul, a Ministry environmental co-op student, supervised the prompt installation of temporary amphibian fencing to funnel the toadlets into collection buckets. To manage the migration, Linda and Kate worked closely with the Ministry's District office in Courtenay. Doug Wright, Road Area Manager, Sue Pauwels, Area Manager, and Nathan VandenDungen, TELP, Development Approvals played key roles in coordinating Ministry efforts to save the toadlets and managing those involved. Chris Rabbitt and Marlene Leach from the Youth Employment Program with the Ministry's Rest Area Rangers were seconded to assist District Staff. Ministry contractors and numerous volunteers also came to help. Many hours were spent building the temporary amphibian fence, capturing the toadlets and transporting them in buckets safely to the other side of the highway. Among the volunteers were Doug's wife and Sue's husband, who gave up their weekends to help monitor toadlet recovery efforts and pick up the little creatures.

Relentlessly, the migration continued day and night for over eight weeks. At its peak, it is estimated that over 50,000, penny-sized toadlets were trying to cross the

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highway each day. As the waves of toadlets quickly rose and increasing numbers of volunteers were involved in their recovery, Doug and Sue took further steps to ensure public safety.

They quickly had the existing solid highway median barriers replaced with skuppered ones to enable any toadlets that managed to bypass the amphibian fencing a better chance of crossing the highway. Doug also had the northbound curbside lane of the highway closed to traffic to protect the toads and those carrying them, as well as a rapidly growing number of news media personnel, complete with camera crews vying for good pictures. The toadlet migration received extensive media attention across Canada. In addition, many local people were driving out to the migration site and stopping on the highway to witness the event. The decision to close one northbound lane of the highway was not a simple one, as it had significant impacts to commercial traffic flow and increased the potential for motor vehicle collisions. Given the convergence of toadlets and humans, something had to be done right away, so Doug and Sue



Toadlet photo by Kayt Chambers

had warning signs and traffic cones put in place to direct traffic away from the toadlets and volunteers. As a result of Doug and Sue's initiative, the bucket brigade transported an estimated one million toadlets safely across the highway without incident.

With the recent onset of fall and lower temperatures, toadlet highway hopping has slowed down considerably and the Vancouver Island

Inland Highway is returning to normal. The Ministry is currently assessing the migration event and identifying environmental factors which may have contributed to it. Ministry environmental staff are trying to determine if the migration was a one-time occurrence, or if future migrations are possible. Steps are being taken to identify what can be done to protect the western toadlets in the Pup Creek area should migrations become more regular events. A wildlife migration response protocol is also being developed to assist Ministry staff respond quickly, should another toad, newt, turtle, snake or other small creature tsunami strike a Provincial highway.



Radio Repeater Tower Upgrades

At the end of July, Stuart Anderson and Steve Drew arrived on the Queen Charlottes to work on some upgrades to the radio repeater towers in the area. These pictures were taken on the Juskatla repeater west of Port Clements. Fantastic views, remote, lots of bear scat, and no rain!