

North Dakota Getting Its First Wildlife Crossings

Construction will protect both travelers and wildlife on this busy highway

by Jim Fuglie

U.S. Highway 85 is North Dakota's deadliest highway. If you're not familiar with it, the busy route runs north and south along the western edge of the state from our border with Canada to our border with South Dakota, through the North Dakota Badlands, some of the state's most scenic and fragile landscapes.

Even though it passes through what has historically been the most remote area of our state, it has the most fatal accidents, the most injury accidents, and the most property damage accidents of any highway in North Dakota.

The reason? It's now the main drag through Bakken oil boom country, and it now has some of the highest traffic volumes in the state. Trucks. Really big trucks. Lots of them. And in them are drivers who are often young and reckless, sometimes really, really drunk, always in a hurry, and don't have a clue about driving in our weather conditions.

More often than not, when you read in the paper of a traffic fatality in Bakken country, you'll learn that the accident was caused by a relative newcomer to the state. Problem is, also more often than not, the victim in a fatal accident is an innocent North Dakotan who just happened to be in the wrong place at the wrong time... when somebody ran a stop sign, or passed a truck when they shouldn't have, or was driving one of those huge oil tanker trucks in a careless manner.

A Growing Problem

State officials recognized the problem a few years ago and began the process of upgrading the highway to make it safer. A project to make the highway four lanes wide is underway between the Bakken's two hotspots -- Williston and Watford City. By the end of 2016, drivers should be using all four lanes of the new highway.

Next up is the 60-mile stretch through the Badlands from Watford City down to Interstate 94 at Belfield. The DOT is completing an environmental impact statement on that project now, mostly necessitated by the fact that the highway passes through the North Unit of Theodore Roosevelt National Park and the Little Missouri National Grasslands, and calls for upgrading or replacing the historic Long X Bridge over the Little Missouri State Scenic River.

All those things have attracted the attention of the public, including conservation organizations, wildlife groups and the state's Game and Fish Department, because Highway 85 is not just the deadliest highway in the state for humans -- it is the deadliest for wildlife as well.

Game and Fish has long been concerned about the number of animal-vehicle collisions on the highway. Rubber tire disease claimed so many bighorn sheep a couple of years ago that Game and Fish actually had to pick up and move the remainder of what used to be a herd of 43 out of the area along Highway 85 to get them out of danger.

Now, the proposed bigger, wider, and faster highway through some of the state's most important big game habitat will mean increased distances for wildlife to cross, greater traffic

volumes and potentially higher speeds, and the department is paying close attention to the design of the new road.

Savings Lives

Everybody recognizes the safety need. Separating the lanes of northbound and southbound traffic should reduce accidents and fatalities. But it's going to be a lot harder for the critters to make safe passages across the four lanes, increasing the likelihood of animal-vehicle collisions. As a result, North Dakota will get its first-ever "wildlife crossings" as part of the project.

Construction of the first one is already under way as part of the first phase of the project. It's just south of the Missouri River bridge at Williston, where the highway passes through the Lewis and Clark Wildlife Management Area. According to **Bruce Kreft**, a department wildlife biologist who's been working with the DOT on design of the crossing, it will be a 15-foot high, 40-foot wide underpass, with appropriate fencing along the highway to encourage wildlife to cross under the highway instead of over it.

It's essentially a moose crossing, recognizing the growing number of moose in the Williston area. Kreft says the department is seeing a number of moose fatalities in the area, and moose are more likely to use an underpass than an overpass, hence the design.

Game and Fish Wildlife Chief **Jeb Williams** says his department is mostly concerned about keeping people safe.

"These are good-sized critters," he says, and we need to do everything possible to keep them off the highway. Williams said similar crossings in Montana have proven successful.

Kreft, who's been to Montana with North Dakota DOT officials to look at crossings similar to the one being built now, says deer will also use the underpasses, and there's a healthy deer population in that area of the state as well.

Multiple Crossings

For the second phase of the widening project through the Badlands, Game and Fish is proposing five additional crossings. Topography and deference to the species of critters likely to use the crossings dictate whether they will be overpasses or underpasses.

For example, a crossing proposed just north of the North Unit of Theodore Roosevelt National Park would be an overpass, basically a bridge over the highway, where bighorn sheep, deer and elk would make their way across safely.

"Deer will go through a lot of things, but bighorns like an open space for crossing," Kreft says. "They will use the bridge."

Kreft said other proposed crossings include one located under the bridge where the road crosses the Little Missouri River at a scenic overlook just south of the national park "where the wildlife guys say they have a lot of mortality," and on the north and south sides of State Highway 200, which intersects with Highway 85 about halfway between Watford City and Belfield.

The department has good pronghorn antelope migration data for the areas near Highway 200, and studies in other states have shown pronghorns will only use overpasses, so that's what will be built there.

Kreft says the department also has good bighorn sheep migration data, and the migration of both antelope and bighorns is necessary to maintain the population. Habitat fragmentation caused by the oil boom is already happening on a large scale in western North Dakota -- witness the severe decline in sage grouse in the southwest corner of the state, for example -- and our wildlife biologists hope these crossings will help facilitate seasonal movement of animal herds and stave off further declines in our wildlife population.

Funding the projects

The biggest issue with the crossings is likely to be money. Crossings are expensive, maybe costing as much as a couple million dollars each. We haven't seen any cost estimates yet. Maintenance is expensive as well. The department is likely going to need some support to convince DOT officials, and the governor, for whom they work, that the expense is justified. Letters in support of the crossings to the governor from concerned citizens, and especially from local wildlife clubs, would not be out of order, and the letters should come soon.

Decisions on the final design will be made as soon as the EIS is complete, as early as mid-2016.

There will also be public meetings when the EIS is complete, and that's a good time for wildlife clubs to show up and express their support. Keep your eyes open this spring for meetings in your area. Conservation groups have encouraged the DOT to hold public meetings across the state, not just in the project area, because the Badlands are also a high visitation area for outdoor recreation -- hikers, cyclist, photographers, birders and hunters.

And conservation groups are also encouraging the DOT to take steps to preserve the integrity of the North Unit of Theodore Roosevelt National Park. For example, **Jan Swenson**, executive director of the Badlands Conservation Alliance, has suggested lowering the speed limit for the seven mile stretch of the road that crosses through the park, and putting up signage well in advance of the entrance to the park advising drivers that they are entering a very sensitive environmental area. National Parks provide refuge to a lot of wildlife which may stray near the road. Both reasonable suggestions, I think.

In her statement to the DOT at a public hearing last year, Swenson said "As this proposed study for expansion of Highway 85 moves forward, Badlands Conservation Alliance insists that the ND DOT... "move forward ONLY with the aim of a state-of-the-art design that recognizes the need for flexibility, creativity, and use of the very best engineering and construction technology. This is the only way to appropriately address transportation safety needs while preserving the integrity, nay the sanctity, of the Little Missouri River Valley."

The sanctity of the Little Missouri River Valley. An important consideration, indeed. I'll talk more about that next time.

Jim Fuglie is a former North Dakota Tourism Director who grew up hunting and fishing in southwest North Dakota. He is retired and lives in Bismarck, and spends much of his time exploring the back roads and trails of the Bad Lands.