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Big Sky leaders to teach hands-on wildlife safety



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Posted By **Jack Reaney**

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A shelf inside the mobile wildlife education center contains animal skulls, molded scat and paw prints, among other

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hands-on learning material. PHOTO BY JACK REANEY

‘Mobile wildlife education center’ to inform visitors, residents and workers about local wildlife, backcountry safety

By **Jack Reaney** *STAFF WRITER*

Charles Johnson paces excitedly around a trailer, quizzing EBS on paw prints, scat, pelts, and the difference between antlers and horns.

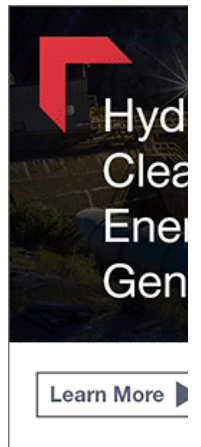
More than just a trailer, it’s a “mobile wildlife education center,” Johnson says. He’s leading an effort called [Wild Big Sky](#), which aims to bring Big Sky’s visitors, locals and workers up to speed with the needs of our forest-dwelling neighbors. Beginning this week and running indefinitely, Johnson and other trained community leaders will host pop-up wilderness education around Big Sky, quizzing and teaching curious people “to better prepare the community and tourists with practices that mitigate potential human-wildlife conflicts,” according to a Wild Big Sky press release.

The mobile wildlife education center includes animal skulls, scat molds, taxidermy and fur samples, a TV monitor showing slides to practice species identification, a remote-controlled, charging bear to practice deploying inert (non-active) bear spray, and a variety of informational printouts tailored for various audiences—from kids’ coloring books to printouts in Spanish.

Johnson is the director of security for the Spanish Peaks Mountain Club, where a grizzly sow [recently lumbered across a driveway with a her cubs](#)—a reminder that humans only recently moved into that apex predator’s ecosystem, now living together on close quarters.

He spoke with EBS in the club parking lot as he prepared to host the first of two “train the trainer” sessions, he said. Any Big Sky community member who completes Johnson’s training will be able to rent the trailer, free of charge, aside from the cost of replacing inert bear spray. Johnson hopes community leaders will bring the trailer to community and business events, employee barbecues and schools.

The second training will take place on June 12. Those interested in becoming eligible to use the trailer can [email Charles Johnson](#) for more information.



The mobile wildlife education center. PHOTO BY JACK REANEY

The Wild Big Sky program is comprised of local employers: Town Center, Spanish Peaks Mountain Club, Montage Big Sky, Lone Mountain Land Company, Yellowstone Club, and Moonlight Basin [launched the Wild Big Sky website](#) last year “to centralize the best information available on safe human-wildlife interactions,” the release states. The mobile wildlife education center adds a hands-on, interactive learning environment.

“I need visuals,” Johnson said, holding up fox and bobcat skulls, and distinguishing between taxidermy grouse feathers. “I need the touching; I need the sight.”

He emphasized that Wild Big Sky’s main goal is not to scare people or deter them from exploring the outdoors. Rather, the program intends to spread awareness—not just the danger of bears but also moose, the importance of proper food and waste storage, and the need to give space to animals such as calving elk, Johnson suggests. He said grizzly bears get the most attention, but safe coexistence between humans and other animals is just as crucial as Big Sky continues to grow in population and visitation.

“With the potential to reach thousands of individuals each year, we aspire to create a more informed and responsible community that prioritizes both human safety and the well-being of local wildlife. With this resource, we hope the negative interactions with wildlife become a thing of the past,” Johnson stated in the release.

Montana Department of Fish, Wildlife and Parks partnered with Wild Big Sky to inform the quality of educational resources in the mobile education center. The nonprofit [People and Carnivores](#) provided a grant for the construction of the trailer, according to the release.

“The Mobile Wildlife Education Center is an innovative and practical example other resort communities should replicate to reduce human-wildlife conflicts,” stated Rosie Costain, program and communications coordinator for People and Carnivores. “It’s a win for the Big Sky community, visitors, and the local wildlife.”

“I am excited to see the impact the Big Sky community will have through their Wild Big Sky program,” stated Danielle Oylar, wildlife stewardship outreach specialist with Montana FWP. “The mobile wildlife education center will help spread the word that people living in and visiting Big Sky can be great stewards of our wildlife.”

Johnson said this is “an asset that we need” as a community. He looks forward to seeing the trailer in use at the weekly farmers market, Music in the Mountains, and at BASE.

Johnson gives a demonstration during the first of two “train the trainers” sessions, on May 30. COURTESY OF WILD BIG SKY

Various horns and antlers sit on a removable shelf outside the trailer. Johnson held up two antlers and asked which belonged to a mule deer and which to a white-tailed deer. He pointed out the difference, before lifting up a black bear pelt to show how its claws differ from a grizzly's.

As more community leaders become trained in hands-on teaching through Wild Big Sky, the trailer could become a community fixture. And most anyone who spends a few minutes at the mobile wildlife education center is apt to bring new knowledge to the outdoors, helping keep Big Sky wild.

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Jack Reaney



Jack Reaney is the Staff Writer for Explore Big Sky.

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