

Wilderness Hiking Safety Tips

Park visitors need to accept wilderness on its own unique terms. Proper preparedness and hazard awareness can prevent hiking injuries.

Be prepared

Wear sturdy boots that are broken in and are comfortable and know how they respond to wet slippery surfaces. Get in trail shape before the trip--fatigue often leads to injuries. Traveling with at least one hiking companion adds to your safety margin.

Wear pants, wind or rain pants, and a long sleeve shirt during more hazardous hiking conditions, such as after a rain. The extra clothing can reduce the degree of any injuries from a fall.

A hiking pole or walking stick can be very helpful in maintaining your balance in hazardous conditions. Stay aware of your surroundings, and preplan your approach to more hazardous areas.

Extra weight wears you down and reduces your agility over uneven terrain. Pack as light as possible. Leave the extras behind.

And aware

Anything wet (from dew, rain, frost, snow) can be a hazard and even more so if it's on a slope - water bars, tree roots, bare rock, stepping stones, tree branches, loose pebbles/fine rocky soils, muddy ground, board walks. A moose with a calf; bulls in rut, and Yellow jacket nests in the ground near the trail can also be hazards while hiking.

Know how to hike avoid hazards

Step over water bars, logs, or tree roots rather than on them. These surfaces are often slippery, and your feet may slide sideways, especially on a slope.

Board walks can be very slippery when wet. Slow your pace, keep your steps shorter, and your weight over your feet. (Do not slide into your step.) When stepping on stepping stones, keep your weight centered over your step to avoid sliding or slipping.

When faced with barren rock on a slope, you may find there is a better option just off to the side where people have traveled. Look for it.

Think ahead of time what you'll do if you start to slide or fall so you are prepared for it. If falling, do not try to catch yourself; try to avoid landing on your hands, elbows or knees. Landing on the side of your body is much safer. If you start to slide, sometimes you can stop the slide, (with a hiking pole, or hanging on to a tree). If the slope is such where you know you are going to slide, lowering your center of gravity, by sitting down and sliding on your feet or bottom, is safer. If sliding while standing up keep your weight over your feet and bend your knees--do not lean back or forward while sliding.

If you come upon moose, don't get too close. Give them enough distance. Use binoculars or zoom lens to get a closer look. Watch for Yellow Jacket nests in the ground near the trail, and make sure you carry an emergency sting kit if you are allergic to bees.

And how to avoid becoming fatigued

Fatigue slows your awareness and preparedness to hike safely. Avoid fatigue by following these guidelines:

Stay hydrated - drink plenty of water, even on cool, wet days.

Ensure adequate calorie intake - don't wait until you feel hungry.

Take more frequent rest breaks, but not so long you begin to stiffen up.

Stay warm. Becoming cold reduces your awareness.

Watch out for other members of your party getting fatigued and take appropriate action and care.

Your wilderness experience can have a happy ending if you stay aware and come prepared.