

Hiking Tips

No one ever plans to get lost, but it does sometimes happen. Each year, North Carolina's park rangers spend numerous hours searching for hikers who did not return on time, slipped on waterfalls, got off the trail or encountered other problems. Follow the tips below to have a safe and enjoyable hike.

- Avoid hiking alone because the "buddy system" is safer during any type of activity. If traveling with a group, never stray from the group.
- Tell someone where you are going and when you will return. Don't forget to check in with them when you get back.
- Stay on marked trails. Making shortcuts and "bushwhacking" causes erosion and greatly increases your chance of becoming lost. As you hike, pay attention to trail blazes (paint marks on trees) and landmarks.
- Never climb on waterfalls.
- Always carry quality rain gear and turn back in bad weather. If you become wet or cold, it is important to get dry and warm as quickly as possible, avoiding hypothermia.
- Dress in layers and avoid cotton. Today's hikers can choose from numerous fabrics that wick moisture, dry quickly or conserve heat.
- All hikers (especially children and older adults) should carry a whistle, which can be heard far away and takes less energy than yelling. Three short blasts is a sign of distress.
- Carry plenty of drinking water and never assume stream water is safe to drink.
- Don't count on cell phones to work in the wilderness. Also, don't rely on a GPS to prevent you from getting lost. Batteries can die or the equipment can become damaged or lost.
- Wear bright colors. Don't dress children in camouflage.

Carry An Emergency Kit

Each hiker should have these items:

- Water
- First Aid Kit
- Whistle
- Small flashlight with extra batteries
- Brightly colored bandana

Each season has its special challenges; be sure you're prepared.

Rainy Spring

Water Crossings: In spring and after heavy rains, streams can change from trickles to torrents, making crossings difficult. If you decide to ford a stream, be extremely careful. Keeping your boots on will provide better footing and prevent your feet from going numb from the cold water. Unbuckle your pack's waistbelt before starting. Use common sense and, if in doubt, don't cross.

Bugs: Black fly season usually runs from late spring to early summer. A good insect repellent will help keep the worst of the biters away. Look for products with icaridin and Deet which have been proven to be the best insect repellent. Lyme disease has been reported in NC. A good insect repellent will help repel ticks, and the threat of disease can be minimized by quick removal of any attached ticks. Check yourself for ticks anytime you return from a hike.

Other methods to avoid ticks:

- Tuck your pant legs into your socks, wear long sleeves and keep your shirt tucked into your waistband. If you will be outside for an extended amount of time use duck tape to prevent ticks from crawling under your clothes. Permethrin is another type of repellent used to prevent ticks and kills them on contact. One application to pants, socks, and shoes typically stays effective through several washings. For details on permethrin visit the [Center of Disease Control and Prevention](#).

Sunny Summer

In summer, the heat can create problems for hikers, including heat exhaustion, which will leave you feeling tired, nauseous, dizzy and possibly headaches. Rest, rehydration and a good night's sleep are the treatment for heat exhaustion.

- Heat stroke is a life-threatening illness. Symptoms include confusion, delirium and loss of consciousness. The skin feels hot as the body's cooling mechanism fail

Both heat exhaustion and heat stroke can be prevented by avoiding overexertion on hot days. Pace yourself, rest often and drink plenty of water throughout your hike. Perhaps the most common, and serious condition in the summertime is **dehydration**. Dehydration occurs when your body loses too much fluid, this can happen when you stop drinking water or lose large amounts of fluid through sweating and the exertion of hiking. Not drinking enough fluids can cause muscle cramps, headaches and you may feel faint. Generally your body can reabsorb fluid from your blood and other body tissues. But by the time you become severely dehydrated, you no longer have enough fluid in your body to get blood to your organs, and you may go into shock, which is a life-threatening condition.

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Fall Season

- The days are shorter and darkness comes early in the forest especially in the fall. Plan your hike so you're at hike's end before dark. Always carry a flashlight or headlamp.
- During fall many trails become blanketed with a mat of leaves. Newly fallen leaves can, in effect, camouflage a hiking trail and make navigation more difficult. Wet leaves on a steep trail can prove to be very slippery.
- Temperature during the fall months can change dramatically during the course of a day. When the sun drops over the horizon, temperatures drop very quickly.
- Fall is also hunting season so be sure to wear bright colors—blaze orange is preferred. Hunting season can run from early September through late December.
- Carry extra warm clothing, as you may experience winter conditions, including snow and high winds.

Winter Hazards

Before experiencing winter hiking, one should be comfortable with summer hiking. A minor injury can become life-threatening in the harsh winter environment. Be sure that someone knows your trip plans.

- Be prepared for the extremes in temperature and conditions with the proper gear and clothing. Hypothermia is a hazard year-around, but is especially dangerous in winter.
 - Snow cover may make route finding difficult, so know how to navigate with a map and compass.
 - Early Thaws with their attendant racing waters, engorged streams and mud, can make navigating trails and streams difficult and dangerous at times.
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