

Safety tips

for Outdoor Activities in Alaska

Alaska offers tremendous outdoor recreation opportunities. From taking a walk or camping, to rock climbing, kayaking, or glacier trekking, the chance to engage in enjoyable and exciting outdoor activities is unparalleled. With these activities comes the possibility for accidents, injuries or even death. To increase the likelihood of having a positive outdoor experience, follow these safety tips:

Learn to recognize inclement weather. It includes clouds less than 500ft above the ground, fog so thick you can't see ½ mile, and/or winds in excess of 20 knots. (The National Weather Service calls this a "small craft advisory"). However determining what weather is "inclement" can be more complex than just considering those specific conditions. You might encounter a dangerous weather situation when the clouds are higher than 500 feet, visibility in the fog is greater than ½ mile and the winds are under 20 knots. You must consider the intensity of the weather, the method of transportation you will be using, the activity you will participate in, the direction the weather is moving, and what the forecast is. Alaska can experience driving rain, heavy snow, low clouds, excessive winds, thick fog, and extremely low temperatures. Any one, or combination of these can present dangerous weather conditions. Alaskan newspaper headlines and historic records reveal how often people misjudge the weather, making choices that are unpleasant at best and tragic at worst.

Before you leave, check the weather report. If the weather will be inclement, consider postponing your trip until another time. If the weather report indicates it will be alright, be vigilant as you travel. When you arrive at the site, watch the skies for changes and carry a compact weather radio. If the weather gets bad, find shelter until the worse passes. Stay dry - wet clothes contribute to heat loss. Also, keep sleeping bags and important gear dry at all times.

Have an emergency plan. Consider how you will get help if you need it. Carry a cell phone or radio, but be aware that in many locations, reception is limited and medical assistance may be hours away. Know how to travel to the nearest location where you might get assistance or be able to contact someone to help you.

Pack a first aid kit. Your kit can prove invaluable if you or a member of your group suffers an injury or illness. Check on the web at Mayo Clinic First Aid Kits <http://www.mayoclinic.com/health/first-aid-kits/FA00067> to get an idea what to bring in your kit.

Take emergency supplies. In addition to a first aid kit and a cell phone or other communication device, this includes a map, compass/GPS, flashlight, knife, waterproof fire starter, personal shelter, whistle, warm clothing, rain gear, high energy food, water, and insect protection.

Let someone know where you will be traveling and when you plan to return.

Also let them know how long after your expected return they should contact authorities if they have not heard from you. Be sure to check in with them when you get back.

If at all possible, don't travel alone. Alaska's rugged terrain, dense vegetation, numerous bodies of water, and inclement weather can create hazardous conditions. Each year at least one, and often several people traveling alone in Alaska die. Travel with one or more people so you can help each other in the event of an emergency.

Make sure the members of your group have adequate clothing and footwear.

In Alaska that often means polypropylene, rain or snow gear. If you are going with children, ask them to show you what is in their packs, and remind them to put the extra clothes they might need at the top of the pack. Avoid wearing cotton clothing.

If you will be overnighing, arrive early. Plan your trip so that you arrive at your actual campsite or anchorage with enough daylight to check the entire site and to set-up camp or to safely anchor your boat.

Check for potential hazards. On land be sure to check the site thoroughly for glass, sharp objects, dead branches up in trees, and hazardous terrain. If you see signs of bear or other animal trails through the site, it would be best to relocate. When boating, know the tides, steer away from underwater hazards, and anchor in a safe location.

Avoid areas of natural hazards. Check the contour of the land and look for potential trouble due to rain. Areas that could flood or become extremely muddy can pose a problem. Also be careful when camping near the ocean. Rising tides during the night can flood a campsite built too close to the water. Be aware of periodic high bore tides in South Central Alaska and mudflats of glacial silt that should be avoided.

Hazardous terrain. Use caution when hiking near ledges and over rocks, including scree slopes (slopes covered with small rocks that can slide and take you with them). There have been many fatalities in Alaska from falls in rugged terrain.

Take drinking water with you or purify stream water. Alaska has a reputation for crystal clear streams, but don't trust that reputation. Snow banks, lakes, and streams may be contaminated with Giardia, an intestinal parasite. Carry your own drinking water, or purify water with bleach, iodine or by boiling. Be sure to follow directions as techniques vary depending on where they are being used.

Inspect you camp site. Look for a level site with enough room to spread out all your gear. Alf you can find one, a site that has trees or shrubs on the side of prevailing winds will help block strong, unexpected gusts.

Build fires in a safe area. Your open fires and fuel-burning appliances must be far enough away from the tent to prevent ignition from sparks, flames, and heat. Never use a flame or any other heating device inside a tent. Use a flashlight or battery-powered light instead.

Make sure your fires are always attended. Be sure you have an area for a fire that cannot spread laterally or vertically - a grill or stone surface is ideal. When putting the fire out, drown it with water, making sure all embers, coals and sticks are wet. Embers buried deep within the pile have a tendency to reignite later. Sometimes they can burn duff on the forest floor and then spread underground. And don't think the weather in Alaska makes it impossible for wildfires to ever start here - even in the temperate rainforests we sometimes have fires.

Pitch your tent in a safe spot. Make sure your tent is made of a flame-retardant fabric, and set up far enough away from the campfire. Keep insects out of your tent by closing the entrance quickly when entering or leaving.

Be cautious when using a propane stove. Read the instructions that come with the stove and propane cylinder. Use the stove as a cooking appliance only - never leave it unattended while it's burning. Always provide adequate ventilation to avoid carbon dioxide build up which can be deadly.

Watch out for bugs. Mosquitoes, white-sox, no see-ums, wasps, and bees can be a problem in many parts of the state. Avoid attracting stinging insects by wearing light-colored clothing and avoiding perfumes or colognes. Use mosquito head nets and appropriate insect repellent to protect yourself.

Try to prevent dangerous wildlife encounters. Most often you will not see the wild animals that are near you in the woods. To ward off bears, keep your campsite clean, and do not leave food, garbage, coolers, cooking equipment or utensils out in the open. In some areas you'll need to hang your food from ropes between two trees- bring a small pulley, rope and container. Bring bear spray and know how to use it. And if possible locate your cooking area down wind and away from sleeping area. Never feed wild animals. Remember that bears and moose are potentially dangerous and unpredictable - Use a flashlight at night - many animals feed at night and the use of a flashlight may warn them away

Beware of poisonous and harmful plants. Familiarize yourself with any dangerous plants that are common to the area. Some, such as cow parsnip can cause skin to blister. If you come into contact with a plant that irritates the skin, immediately rinse the affected area with water and apply a soothing lotion such as calamine. Stinging nettle and devil's club have sharp spines or thorns that can be difficult and painful to remove. Other plants such as bog laurel, beachhead iris, or green false hellebore are poisonous to eat. Only eat plants or plant parts you know are safe to eat.

Practice good hygiene. Make sure you wash your hands, particularly after using the toilet and before handling food, to prevent your group from becoming ill.

Enjoy your trip! Whether it is a once in a lifetime visit to Alaska or one of many outdoor adventures you have in the state, do your best to make it a safe endeavor.

Some of these safety tips were taken from a Six Rivers National Forest list and added to or adapted for use in Alaska.