

Tips and Safety and Etiquette

Updated October 2023

Maintained by Nitin – let me know if links are broken

These tips are my informed opinion. If you have any doubts or questions, please consult an expert/guide, and let me know if there are any errors.

Everyone is responsible for group safety and enjoyment. Do your own research. Speak up politely and directly if you have a question or there's something that needs to be addressed. However it is a group activity led by an organizer, and personal preferences cannot always be accommodated.

Responsibility

You are responsible for your preparation and equipment, and assessing your skill and physical condition compared to the description of the trip, as well as unforeseen possibilities that go with being in the mountains. A few very real possibilities:

1. The trip organizer is unconscious... now what?
2. You're separated from the group... now what?
3. The organizer makes a big mistake in navigating and the trip ends up being 50 to 100% longer and tougher...now what?
4. It was sunny and dry at the trailhead. Now it's windy, rainy, and 20 degrees colder with 3 or 4 hours back to shelter... now what?
5. You or someone else in the group gets injured... now what?

Don't Post Your GPS Tracks

Let there remain some secrecy and adventure to less common trips. Our wild spaces are being loved to death. There's value and satisfaction in having to work for it, and in not being out with a crowd.

XC Skiing

See this helpful page from another group

<https://www.ramblers.ab.ca/Reference/SkiEtiquette>

Pace

We are hiking as a group. Our pace varies, but is often relatively slow. If you must hike very quickly and don't want to be with the group, you should find another group. If you're a faster hiker and you wait for the rest of the group, then when they catch up, wait a few minutes before you move on. Otherwise the slower hikers don't really get a proper rest... plus it's a good opportunity to actually talk to each other.

Spacing

Leave some room in front of you - this prevents being whacked by a branch, being hit by a pole, stepping on heels, or bumping into the person ahead of you. It also helps you see hazards, take better pictures, have a bit of privacy if not in conversation, and appreciate your surroundings.

Drivers

Ensure your license and insurance are up to date. Ensure your vehicle is in good condition for the road and weather. Check your washer fluid. Take care of yourself - rested, sober, not hungover, fed and watered, etc. Don't make your passengers wait for you in the morning or at the end of the day. Plan bathroom breaks. Let your passengers know your plans earlier rather than later. If you have concerns, let your passengers know.

Passengers

Pick up after yourself, put muddy boots in a plastic bag, offer to wipe windows if you stop for gas, contribute gas money, don't make your driver wait for you at the end of the day, let your driver know what you need earlier rather than later. If you are concerned, let your driver know.

Silence

These are social events so some conversation is great - we want to get to know each other, find new outdoor companions and make friends.

There is also a lot of benefit to appreciating the environment through silent time when you can hear the song of the birds, the trickle of water, wind in the leaves, buzzing of insects, and nature in general. Bear bells are awful and don't work.

Control the volume of your voice so you aren't shouting to all. Be aware of noise levels in the car as well. Device noises that you are used to may be annoying to your companions.

My personal preference is to limit conversation about activating public issues: disasters, wars, political and religious controversies, and other outrages/righteousness.

Hiking Alone

Hiking alone on a busy trail isn't hugely risky but on the other hand isn't completely safe. On a quiet trail it can be risky. Experienced and confident hikers may make that choice, but in general we don't want to leave anyone to walk alone. For that reason it is important to select hikes that are appropriate to your ability, so that you don't feel the need to stop or turn back. At the same time, we will not necessarily turn back or stop the whole group for the sake of a person who has misjudged his/her ability. Staying together also creates gaps between groups on the trail so that wildlife can easily cross.

Weather

Read the introduction to any guidebook about hiking in the Rockies – you'll find the tersely worded reminder that weather conditions can change rapidly and drastically. It's not unusual to encounter unpredictable snow and cold at higher elevations even in July and August. Being wet and cold can lead to hypothermia. Always bring an extra layer or two, spare socks, and a hat. See the full equipment list for additional suggestions.

Navigation

If you're driving, and perhaps even if you're not in case of emergency, it's a really good idea to look at the map and directions posted on the site. It saves you and everyone else a lot of trouble if you can make it to the trailhead. Similarly, being familiar with the trail map gives you some idea of where you are in case of emergency. If you got separated from the group, would you know the way back to the trail? And once on the trail, the shortest way back to the road or to help?

Leading

If you're at the front of the group, people are following you. You're not just making decisions for yourself, but for others. Be sure that you speak regularly with the organizer about the planned route. Often there are options that are more difficult or dangerous than the advertised level - and therefore the level of the weakest members of the group. It becomes unsafe for some, and inconvenient for everyone, if someone cannot continue, is very afraid, has to go very slowly, or has an accident, injury, or strain.

Limits

Don't exceed your limits. Read the trail description I've provided, consider the length and vertical compared to other hikes you've done recently. Elevation can kick your ass. I've had marathon runners who were daunted by moderate hills. Consider your current fitness and any injury or condition. With the adrenaline going it's easy to feel like going that extra bit further, but remember going down and back is hard work and may feel like a long way. Fatigue, sore knees or back, rubber legs, can increase your chance of tripping, slipping, spraining or some other injury. We want you to come hike another day!

A change in trail or weather conditions can also drastically alter the difficulty level and danger of a trip.

If you're hiking with others don't pressure them past their limits. A little stretch is fine and necessary to overcome psychological fatigue, but a big push can be risky. If you're reaching your limit and there's a good spot to rest, consider stopping and waiting for the group to come back, preferably not alone, but it may be safer than exceeding your physical capability.

Food and Water

It's very important to bring enough food and water. We're usually out for a few hours so be sure to eat some protein before we leave, and bring some real food along, both quick energy (fruit, juice, candy) and slow energy (cheese, meat, nuts). Some salty foods are good to keep up the electrolytes. There are different guidelines for drinking water, but one cup/ 250mL per hour is a good starting point. Consider bringing extra food/water in case the trip runs longer, and some to leave in the car in case we get back hungry and thirsty. Sometimes the trailhead is not near any stores. Fainting from hunger is frowned upon.

Photos

We have a lot of photographers who come out hiking, so chances are you'll have your picture taken and probably posted on our website. We'd also like you to be in a group photo. If you take any pictures, please pick a few favorites and post them to the website. Photos posted to the website are accessible to the public in whatever resolution you post them (max 10MB file). Ongoing video is not welcome. Short clips are.

Medical Conditions

If you have asthma, severe allergies, or other conditions that are possibly triggered by physical exertion or aspects of the natural environment, be sure to come prepared with inhalers, epi-pens, etc. You may want to let one other person know on the hike know about your condition, symptoms, and actions to be taken, however we cannot be responsible for you. If you have an allergy that is triggered by what companions do, e.g., eat peanut butter sandwiches, these trips may not be the best idea, as there is limited ability to communicate with attendees.

Leave No Trace

Mountain areas are under a lot of pressures from people. Plants grow very slowly under the harsh conditions, and animals have the best chance for individual and species survival if left unaffected. Don't pick any flowers, avoid stepping on anything growing. Don't feed the wildlife. Please carry out all garbage including biodegradables (cool climate means slow decomposition), stay on the trails (to protect slow-growing plants), don't shortcut (to reduce creation of water erosion channels), don't feed any wildlife, and don't take anything – leave the unique and interesting items for the next group to oooh and aaah over.

<http://www.Int.org/programs/principles.php>

<https://www.adventure-journal.com/2018/09/leave-no-trace-also-means-food/>

<https://www.kananaskis.org/outdoor-ethics-2-look-down/>

Toilets

There are usually outhouses at trailheads, but not along the trails. Expect that there might not be toilet paper or hand sanitizer. Sometimes outhouses are out of order, or day use areas are closed. Carry a cathole shovel and other supplies. Don't litter toilet paper. In winter, think about what will happen when the snow/ice melts.

<http://www.camping-expert.com/how-to-shit-in-the-woods.html>

Break-Ins

Don't leave valuables in the car at the train station or trailhead. If you must, place items in the trunk or other non-visible location before arriving at the trailhead.

Wildlife

Don't feed, touch, scare, or otherwise interfere with any wildlife. Don't pick any flowers; avoid stepping on anything growing, especially in the alpine. While we all like to see wildlife, animals that become accustomed to humans are more likely to be killed or relocated.

http://www.pc.gc.ca/docs/pc/guide/nature/wild_e.pdf

Bear Spray

It's recommended to understand where there is bear risk, carry bear spray in an accessible location, and KNOW how to use it. Bear spray canisters should not be left in a hot car - they may explode! It may be a good idea to put bear spray in a sealed bag or other container both at home and in the car. Ensure your bear spray safety clip is always in place, and that it's connected to the canister with a string or cable tie. You want to be able to remove it, but not have it fall off completely.

Dogs

Dogs may be scented as predators, threatening other wildlife. Also:

Alta. parks official blames unleashed dogs for aggressive bear

Last Updated: Monday, July 31, 2006 | 1:58 PM MT

CBC News

A black bear and two cubs in the Canmore Nordic Centre Provincial Park had to be moved to a more remote area because of run-ins with unleashed dogs.

The bear has been in the area for at least eight years, but had to be driven to a more remote location Friday because of a handful of run-ins with dogs that were not on leash, said Glen Naylor, the area's conservation officer.

The bear was aggressive with the dogs because of her cubs, he added.

"In this valley here, there are very few occasions actually where you can have your dog off leash, however a lot of people decide that they're not going to do that, and unfortunately this is one of the results."

Drinking Water in the Outdoors

There is some risk to drinking water from mountain sources.

<http://www.hc-sc.gc.ca/fniah-spnia/promotion/public-publique/home-maison/fn-pn/summer-ete-eng.php#b1>

Closed Areas

I see a lot of trip reports and meetups scheduled for areas that are closed or have voluntary restrictions. Indefatigable comes to mind. Do your part and avoid these areas. Parks organizations have identified them for a reason. Don't kill the wildlife by damaging their habitat, stressing them so they can't reproduce, limiting their access to the food they need by being in their buffet.

Parking

Parking at trailheads can get tight. Even if the lot is empty when you arrive, be sure to snug up to your neighbours just as you would in the city - everyone else who arrives after you will appreciate not having to park on the road, or in a ditch or snowbank.

Support

How did it come to be that we have so many protected areas with so many awesome trails? Why don't we just have a bunch of clearcuts, wells, mines, roads, and OHV areas? (All of which we do have plenty even if slightly hidden - take a look at satellite imagery.)

Was it governments? Corporations? Forestry, oil and gas, or mining companies? Motorized vehicle enthusiasts? How are all those areas and trails maintained? Isn't it awesome when you see a wild animal? Wouldn't it be sad if that could never happen again? Already the numbers of most animals are tremendously reduced.

The only reason our protected areas are as big and as good as they are is through the gazillion hours of dedicated volunteers and supporters working individually and through organizations such as Alberta Wilderness Association, CPAWS, Friends of Kananaskis, Nature Conservancy, and others.

There are continually pressures to relax rules, reduce protections, and degrade the protected areas directly or indirectly.

So remember to be active in supporting conservation through surveys, letters, and other political expression; to be a good steward; to volunteer if and how you can; and to donate to, and promote the organization(s) of, your choice.

AllTrails

AllTrails is a good way to find out about new trails and to get information about recent conditions. BUT its descriptions, distances, and elevations are often wrong, tracks may not be good routes, and difficulty ratings are not calibrated in any way – one trip's "difficult" doesn't match another's. Supplement with other sources especially for less common routes.

Fake news?

Don't agree or believe me about anything on this site? That's okay - just find out the facts for yourself from credible sources and choose to join us if your heart and conscience dictate. Let me know if anything is blatantly wrong.

What you can take away from learning outdoor skills

<http://hesperus-wild.org/writing/essays/briefing.htm>

REFERENCE

Don't Waste Your Time in the Canadian Rockies covers trails in the National Parks.

Where Locals Hike in the Canadian Rockies, focused on Kananaskis.

Other good references are the Canadian Rockies Trail Guide, the Kananaskis Country Trail Guide, and A Beginner's Guide to Snowshoeing in the Canadian Rockies, Scrambling in the Canadian Rockies. Since I started the group the number of books and websites has exploded. Many like Bob Spirko's website, and skierroger.ca for cross-country skiing.

The Gem Trek series of maps are great to identify trails and features. The waterproof versions are especially useful. I like the one-time fee of the Canada Maps Pro app for maps and GPS tracks.

Bivouac.com is a mountain reference. mountain-forecast.com and windy.com provide weather information, but localized conditions can vary.

Of course Parks Canada and Alberta Parks have trail reports and other information.

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www.meetup.com/CalgaryHikingMeetup, 2023