

# Wildlife encounters have turned deadly lately. Here's how to stay safe when visiting the outdoors.

6 tips for protecting yourself — and animals — when visiting America's great outdoors

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You may have heard the saying that “a fed bear is a dead bear.” But with travel to national parks booming this summer, wildlife need us to take a deeper look at our behavior outdoors, because sharing snacks with animals barely scratches the surface of how our actions can get wildlife, and ourselves, killed.

“We used to call this the ‘European tourist phenomenon,’” says James Jonkel, a wildlife management specialist for the Montana Department of Fish, Wildlife and Parks in the Missoula area. “What we were seeing early on in the ’70s is a lot of Europeans coming to the United States that were these very vigorous, extreme recreators, extreme hikers, extreme campers, that were wanting to explore the Rocky Mountains.”

While the Europeans were used to the rugged, mountain country, Jonkel says, he felt they were not accustomed to the wildlife American parks have.

What Jonkel describes is inexperience and lack of instinct when it comes to wildlife — regardless of one's outdoor fitness level — leading to behavior that he refers to as “wildlife rude.” He says this lack of common sense is just as present in today's domestic tourists as it was in foreign visitors decades ago, and it is causing problems for animals and humans alike.

The stakes are high: When a conflict occurs between a human and a wild animal, it can lead to death, no matter the context of the conflict. Already this summer, a 65-year-old cyclist in Montana was killed when a grizzly bear pulled her from a tent, though officials said it was not “normal bear behavior.”

Although it is uncommon, humans are being killed for making simple but preventable mistakes.

Not touching or feeding animals in national parks and outdoor recreation areas are only the first steps in establishing good wildlife manners. There is more we can all do to make our shared wilderness areas more harmonious.

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## Be prepared

“When people are hiking through the Bob Marshall [Wilderness Area], or through Yellowstone Park or through Glacier, they have just got to realize that it’s, in essence, like stepping back in time,” Jonkel says, describing how there are more grizzly bears, black bears and mountain lions in these wilderness areas than in the past 100 years. Just like any good time traveler, outdoor adventurers should pack with potential challenges in mind.

When visiting areas with bears, carry bear spray at all times. Bear spray is not very useful when it is locked in the car and a grizzly is charging at you. Also, learn how to safely store food when camping to keep hungry animals at bay. The recent mauling in Montana may have been prevented had the campers not kept food inside their tent.

Not every human-animal conflict is as dramatic and fatal. Even packing reef- and waterway-safe sunscreen and bug repellent can go a long way in protecting animals from damage.

# Know your animals

Part of being prepared for the outdoors is knowing what animals you might come across and basic facts about their behavior.

At Everglades National Park, the wildlife situation is completely unique from the American West. “Many visitors come specifically to see birds and herpetofauna, which are reptiles and amphibians,” says Michelle Collier, the science communications liaison at the park. “Many visitors get the chance to see alligators, crocodiles and manatees. In fact, the Everglades is the only place you can find both the American alligator and the American crocodile in the wild.”

Knowing the differences between an alligator and a crocodile, or a grizzly and a black bear, is essential before entering their territory. And while animals such as elk, moose and bison may seem like quiet vegetarians, their strength when defending themselves can be lethal. Meanwhile, some animals hide beneath our feet, from rattlesnakes to ground-nesting birds, and stepping on either one would be bad.

Intrepid Travel, a tour operator focusing heavily on national parks this year, takes the responsibility of educating guests on wildlife seriously.

“The night before a park visit, we will sit with the group and talk through some of the etiquette around visiting the park,” says Matt Berna, Intrepid Travel’s managing director of North America. “Everything from staying on trails, to bringing enough water for the trip, and what to do in case of animal encounters.”

Once in the park, whether it’s Yosemite in California or Acadia in Maine, the guides reaffirm the importance of respecting wildlife and recognizing their behavior.

## All trash is equal

Littering has always been a problem in national parks, which is why “leave no trace” principles are heavily communicated, but visitors need to understand that when it comes to affecting wildlife, a plastic wrapper is no different from an orange peel or an apple core.

Trash tossed from a car window, biodegradable or otherwise, will attract hungry animals to the side of the road where they, or the predators pursuing them, can get hit by a vehicle. And like directly feeding a wild animal, errant banana peels will cause wildlife to associate humans with food.

## Animals are not for photo ops

This month, a woman died at the Grand Canyon while veering off the path to take photos. Trying to get the perfect shot can also lead to an unfortunate animal encounter if one is not careful.

Approaching animals should be avoided at all times, but the added layer of taking a photo causes more problems. When visitors walk toward animals to photograph them, it can make them unaware of their surroundings while distorting the perception of proximity because they're looking at the screen, not the animal. Even when not taking a photo, it pays to remain observant when in the wild: Safety is never guaranteed.

## **Follow the rules; they protect more than you**

“Following park safety guidelines and rules, like not swimming in freshwater lakes, will help prevent negative wildlife interactions,” Collier says. Everglades will rope off an area along a trail to prevent visitors from approaching a nesting female alligator, for example. But if the barrier is ignored and a human injures the animal, it may need to be culled.

Rule breaking can have indirect consequences as well. “After a bad camper leaves a campsite, the next person suffers,” Jonkel explains. Such campers might pour bacon grease into tree stumps or gut fish at the table, despite posted instructions. A bear might not come the same night this happens, instead showing up one or two weeks later when well-mannered guests are enjoying the site. Leaving a sloppy camp sets up the next camper for possible injury or death, and probable destruction for the bear.

Intervening when rule breaking is observed can save human and animal life. Jonkel recalls a video he saw on YouTube of young boys pelting a cow moose with snowballs, harassing her until she became visibly angry. They leave, but “then five minutes later, some poor old fella comes out of the supermarket with a big load of groceries and gets killed.” Although the video doesn't show it, the moose was probably put down, too.

## **Realize accidents happen**

You can do everything right and still find yourself face to face with a wild animal; the wilderness is unpredictable. The best way to ensure that you and an animal escape a surprise encounter unscathed is to be equipped with species-specific knowledge, carry the tools needed to fend them off, and hope that your fellow outdoor recreators have not set you up for failure.

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