

Hiking, Waterfalls and Ticks.... Oh My!

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Western North Carolina is known for its natural beauty; the highest peaks east of the Mississippi, high diversity of plant and animal species, and of course, beautiful waterfalls. Particularly in the summer months, these waterfalls are great places to spend an afternoon relaxing and cooling off. However, by their very nature, waterfalls are found in rugged areas that can be dangerous if you are not cautious and aware of potential hazards.

The first important tip to staying safe around waterfalls is to do your research on the trail and waterfall beforehand. In some cases, trails will suddenly end up near the top of a waterfall and so it is helpful to have an idea of when to start being on the lookout for dangerous cliffs or steep drops. Reading a description of the trail beforehand will give you a better idea of what to expect and prepare for. If hiking with children or dogs, it will also give you an idea of when to start keeping a closer eye on them.

Another crucial precaution is to always stay on developed trails or observation decks. It may seem tempting to leave these designated paths in an attempt to get a better view or photograph, but the terrain is much more unpredictable. It doesn't always take much to dislodge a rock or slide on a pile of leaves. This is particularly true at the top of a waterfall where the risk is always heightened. It may be common sense to some, but it is also very important to never try and climb down or around a waterfall. The rock around waterfalls tends to be very wet and slippery.

It is also important to consider your footwear before leaving for a hike. Many people choose flip-flops or tennis shoes when setting out to a waterfall. It is extremely important to think about how much traction your footwear will provide on wet rock and how much ankle support you have. Hiking boots or heavy-duty water shoes are usually the best option.

You should also be wary of currents in streams around waterfalls. Even less than a foot of flowing water can have enough force to throw off your balance and send you downstream. For this reason, you should never try and cross a river or stream anywhere near the top of a waterfall.

If you are swimming near a waterfall, swim around the base of the falls. There are two reasons for this: for one, 'white water' is water mixed with oxygen which causes water's density to be lower. This makes it more difficult, or impossible in some cases, to swim back to the surface. If you get caught in this situation, it is important to not panic and swim horizontally out of the whitewater and then up to the surface. The second reason to avoid swimming below falling water is that it tends to create dangerous, circular water currents that can be difficult to escape.

It is also of the utmost importance to be aware of ticks during and after time spent in our local forests. Contrary to popular belief, ticks do not die off in the winter and will be active anytime the temperature is above freezing. They are more active in the warmer months, however. Though we are fortunate that Lyme Disease isn't common in our area, there are still a few other nasty tick-borne illnesses such as Ehrlichiosis or Rocky Mountain Spotted Fever.

There are several precautions you can take to try and avoid getting tick bites. If you know you are going to be in a brushy area where you will be exposed to ticks, it is best to wear long sleeves and pants. Lightly spraying your clothing with products that contain 20% or more DEET, an active ingredient found in insect repellent (avoid getting it in your eyes or on your skin), or treating your clothes with permethrin (lasts through several washes) can also be very effective.

When you are out hiking, it is important to stay on the trail and walk in the center if possible. This will greatly decrease your chances of getting a tick bite. Once you get out of the woods, it is important to check for ticks as soon as possible. One trick that works well is to run a lint roller over your clothes, which picks up any ticks you have crawling on your clothes. Once you arrive home, it is important to bathe as soon as possible and do a full body check. Parents should also do a thorough check of children.

You also want to check pets prior to bringing them inside. Besides the fact that dogs and cats can catch some tick-borne illnesses, pets offer a ride for ticks into family homes where they can latch on to a human.

If you do find a tick on you or a family member, do not panic. Get a pair of fine-tipped tweezers and grasp the tick as close to the skin as possible. Begin to pull the tick away from the skin using even, steady pressure making sure not to twist or jerk the tick. After it's pulled off, examine the skin and make sure that the entire tick was removed. After removing the tick, clean your skin using alcohol or soap and water and dispose of the tick by placing it in alcohol, a sealed bag or container, or wrapping it in tape.

These risks should not keep anyone from enjoying the outdoors. It is just important to minimize these dangers through awareness to keep you, your friends, and your family enjoying the amazing Carolina woods and waters for years to come.

Final notes: Always carry plenty of water and cut the caffeinated drinks. It can be easy to forget to hydrate during a hike. Drinking water before hiking will help with performance. Also, be sure to check out Outdoor magazines "The New Rules of Leave No Trace"
<https://www.outsideonline.com/2276176/21st-century-update-leave-no-trace-principles>.

Polk Fit, Fresh and Friendly (PF3) is a group of 80+ community members, leaders and health professionals, all working together to plan and implement effective strategies to promote wellness in our community. We welcome any individual who is interested in joining us to make our community a healthier place for all. For more information and a list of our 2018 meeting dates, please visit our website at www.polkfitfreshandfriendly.org. Thanks to the Polk County Parks and Recreation staff for providing this outdoor recreation safety information.