

Hiking Safety: Waterfalls and Ticks

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. Waterfalls, by their nature, 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 get you a better idea of what to expect and prepare for.

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. Never try and climb down or around a waterfall. Every year, multiple die from fall by climbing around waterfalls.

It is also important to consider your footwear before leaving for a hike. 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 to cross a river or stream anywhere near the top of a waterfall.

It is also of the utmost importance to be aware of ticks during and after time spent recreating in our local forests. 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. 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 to avoid getting tick bites. First of all, 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 or treating your clothes with permethrin (lasts through several washes) can also be very effective.

When you are out hiking, it is very important to stay on the trail and walk in the center of it 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 to pick 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.

Seth Young is finishing his tenure as the AmeriCorps Trails Coordinator for Polk County Recreation. He has been part of a larger AmeriCorps Program called Project Conserve which promotes environmental conservation and education across Western North Carolina. Polk County Recreation is a strong supporter and participant in the Polk Fit, Fresh & Friendly (PF3) health coalition and appreciates this opportunity on PF3's behalf to share outdoor recreation safety information.

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 2017 meeting dates, please visit our website at www.polkfitfreshandfriendly.org.