

News from the New Hampshire Fish and Game Department

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NH OUTDOOR COUNCIL REMINDS LATE-AUTUMN HIKERS TO "HIKE SAFE"

CONCORD, N.H. -- Fall foliage in New Hampshire's mountains has come and gone, and with the changing seasons comes new challenges for White Mountain hikers. With the cold, ice, and snow of this time of year in mind, outdoors authorities are advising the Granite State's late-autumn visitors to "Hike Safe."

"New Hampshire's woods and mountains are a great place for recreation any time of year, but each season brings with it special challenges and hazards," notes New Hampshire Fish and Game Conservation Officer Lt. Todd Bogardus. "Frankly, the nature of the mountain environment is that it can be a dangerous place. Hikers who are looking forward to an autumn mountain adventure have to realize that winter conditions come early to the mountains, so they have to be prepared for trail conditions that are very different from those they may have enjoyed in summer or early fall."

According to Bogardus, mountain visitors have to take special precautions to enjoy their adventures safely. "Hikers should most definitely take a look at high-mountain weather forecasts, to be better prepared for conditions at this time of year," says Bogardus. "As a general rule, it's significantly colder, windier, and snowier, the higher you climb. Knowing the forecast, and preparing for likely conditions with appropriate clothing, is very important, and even more critical is assessing actual conditions in the field and acting accordingly."

High in the White Mountains, temperatures can get below zero even in October, let alone November or December. Winds are often strong and chilling, visibility can be very poor in low clouds, and snow can fall at any time. Dress in layers to suit varying conditions, and carry extra warm clothing and raingear in your pack. Above all, warns Bogardus, "Don't press onward 'no matter what' - adjust your actual trip to conditions as you find them, and plan ahead for a safe return. Be willing to turn back."

As fall gives way to winter, Bogardus notes that, in addition to colder weather, there are important matters related to trail conditions that hikers sometimes overlook. Trails get snowy and icy at this time of year, sometimes making them hard to find, and often slowing people down as they try to find a safe way to negotiate slippery sections of trail. "Crampons" - special ice spikes strapped to boots - or similar traction devices can make

slick, ice-covered stretches of trail much easier to travel. If you find yourself going much slower than anticipated, says Bogardus, don't hesitate to turn around and head back down.

Another often-overlooked factor is how short the daylight hours have become, and that they'll continue to get even shorter into late December. "An early start, taking maximum advantage of available daylight, is critical - as is having a good flashlight or headlamp, plus spare batteries and a back-up source of light," cautions Bogardus. He adds, "Already this season, hikers have ignored what should be obvious and have been caught out after dark with no light source."

Some locations in the White Mountains have added hazards. "The Forest Service Snow Rangers have chronicled fatal avalanches on Mount Washington as early as November," says Rebecca Oreskes of the White Mountain National Forest, "and similar hazards can be found in other areas, especially those with steep, open slopes. Basic avalanche awareness is needed by all backcountry hikers, plus recognition of other dangers, such as falling ice."

Guidelines for enjoyable and safe hiking are contained in the principles of "hikeSafe," a joint initiative of the New Hampshire Fish and Game Department and the White Mountain National Forest to promote safe and responsible hiking.

Oreskes says that the hikeSafe "Hiker Responsibility Code" sums up the basic tenets of backcountry safety. "Late fall hiking has great rewards, but it also comes with innate challenges and dangers. Being aware of and following the Code are important first steps toward an enjoyable and safe journey."

There are six tenets of the code: 1) Be prepared with appropriate knowledge and gear; 2) Let someone else know your plans; 3) Hiking groups should stick together and not let themselves become separated; 4) Hikers should always be ready to turn back if circumstances, such as changing weather, dictate; 5) Hikers should be ready for emergencies, and, ideally, be set to "self rescue;" and 6) Those who know the code should share its lessons with others.

"In spite of the challenges, most autumn visitors to our state's forests and mountains have great experiences," says Bogardus, "and there's a better chance of having a memorable and satisfying trip if hikers follow the hikeSafe principles."

For information regarding the NH Outdoor Council and links to outdoor safety resources, visit <http://www.nhoutdoorcouncil.org>.

For more information about the hikeSafe Program, visit <http://www.hikesafe.com>.

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