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NATIONAL PARKS

# What You Need to Know About National Park Deaths

By [Sandy Bornstein](#) on August 30, 2019



Getty Images

Every year, [more than 318 million people](#) visit America's 419 National Park System sites, including designated National Parks, National

Lakeshores, National Monuments, National Historic Sites and National Seashores.

Most adventure-seekers don't dwell on safety issues before going on their big trip. And why should they? Only a few incidents reach the public eye each year, and the overall fatality rate is miniscule compared to the total number of visitors.

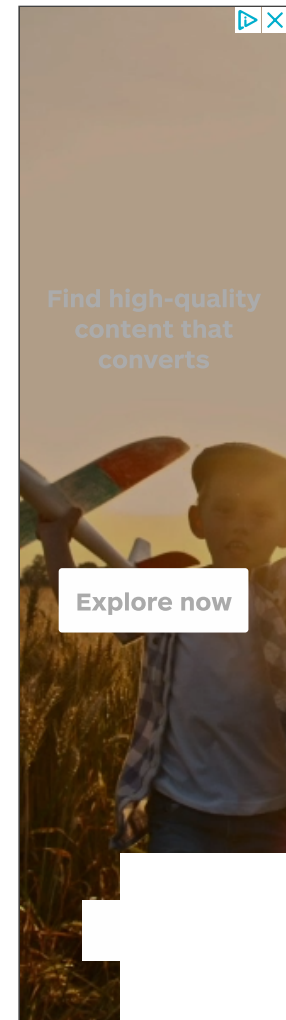
But fatalities happen more often than people may think. Indeed, the very ruggedness that makes nature so appealing also makes it unpredictable and sometimes dangerous; this year alone, there have been multiple reports of people falling to their death, drowning, getting attacked by wildlife and even being crushed by falling rocks.

Is it likely that something will happen when visiting a park? Definitely not. Still, it's important to know what can and has gone wrong, so you can make your visit to a national park a safe one.

Here's everything you need to know.

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How Many People Die in National Parks?





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Just how common are national park fatalities today? Relatively speaking, they're very rare. According to Kathy Kupper, public affairs specialist for the NPS, "More than 70 percent of the national parks did not have any unintentional fatalities between 2005-2013."

Still, the number of incidents is far from nothing — throughout the National Park System, **six people die each week**, amounting to about 312 deaths per year. In 2017, the last year for which stats are available,



search-and-rescue (SAR) teams were deployed for a total of 3,453 incidents.

In some places, the number of incidents is on the rise. Between March and April 2019, for example, four people died at Grand Canyon National Park in Arizona, a weirdly high number for such a short period of time. Grand Canyon is, in fact, one of the deadliest parks in the country.



Which Parks Are Deadliest?



# The Deadliest U.S. National Parks

Deaths recorded in U.S. National Park Service locations (2006-2016)



@StatistaCharts

Source: National Parks Service via Outside Magazine

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Many of the deaths that do occur happen in a few parks that are particularly precarious. (Not coincidentally, they also happen to be among the most visited.)

According to a 2017 investigation conducted by "Outside," 10 national parks pose an especially high risk, earning them the distinction of being the **deadliest in America**. Those parks are, in order of deaths:

1. **Lake Mead National Recreation Area**, where most people die from drownings.
2. **Yosemite National Park**, where falling is the most common cause of injury and death.
3. **Grand Canyon National Park**, also the site of many falls.
4. **Yellowstone National Park**, where burns and thermal injuries from hot springs are the main issue.
5. **Golden Gate National Recreation Area**, home to beaches where many have drowned.
6. **Glen Canyon National Recreation Area**, where Lake Powell is the site of drownings.
7. **Denali National Park**, where mountaineering accidents in unpredictable weather have led to fatalities.
8. **Great Smoky Mountains National Park**, where steep forests and foothills pose falling risks.
9. **Grand Teton National Park**, where people fall from sheer cliffs.
10. **Natchez Trace Parkway**, a 444-mile road where motor-vehicle accidents are the leading cause of death.

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What Causes National Park Deaths?





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At this point, you may be thinking that accidents mostly happen because of human folly. And to an extent, you'd be right.

When Lee H. Whittelsey examined deaths at the nation's oldest park in "Death in Yellowstone: Accidents and Foolhardiness in the First National Park (2014)," he came to the conclusion that it is "impossible to 'safety proof' a national park since stupidity and negligence have been big



elements.” Add in people dying while trying to take selfies (yes, this is happening more often), and you can definitely chalk up some of the fatalities to poor judgment.

But parks are also, in some ways, inherently unsafe, and not all injuries and deaths are the result of poor decision-making.

So what are the most common types of national-park accidents, and how can they be avoided? Let us break it down...

## Car Accidents





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On average, one person dies in a motor-vehicle crash on **National Park Service roadways** every week. According to NPS, crashes are most common during the daytime in summer months, when parks welcome the most visitors.

Of course, car accidents happen everywhere, but there are some specific risks distinct to parks. For one thing, wildlife can prance onto the roadways without any warning, especially at dawn and dusk. Moreover, throughout the day, visitors often park their vehicles to



admire and take pictures of bears, moose and other large animals adjacent to the road — and these stopped vehicles can unintentionally cause accidents and gridlock.

In July 2019, a vehicle driving in Glacier National Park swerved to avoid a stopped car, then **descended down a 40-foot steep hill**. Two people were transported by ambulance and a third was airlifted by ALERT helicopter. Traffic along the Going-to-the-Sun Road was delayed for hours.

Another issue? Road systems in the older parks were constructed for a different generation of vehicles, so the lanes are considerably narrower than today's streets. In rugged terrains, there may be multiple switchbacks, requiring extra caution for people who are accustomed to driving at sea level.

It seems likely that a steep and winding road was a contributing factor, for example, in a July 2019 **fatal accident** near Clingmans Dome, the highest point in Great Smoky Mountains National Park.

### **How to stay safe:**

- Only use pullouts for parking, and remember that the safest view is from inside the car.
- Exercise increased caution at high altitudes.
- It seems basic, but as the “Driving Safety” page on the NPS site emphasizes, always pay attention, even and especially when there are cool things to look at. This alone can make a huge difference.

## Falls



Getty Images

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) report [“Suicides in National Parks 2003-2009,”](#) falls were one of the top

two methods for attempted suicides at parks, and the third leading cause of death overall between 2007-2013.

In many instances, accidental falls result from poor judgment or the desire to get an amazing photo or selfie. Other times, hazardous conditions play a role.

Michael P. Ghiglieri and Thomas M. Myers, authors of “Over the Edge: Death in Grand Canyon,” stated in their book that there have been 126 falls from Grand Canyon’s rims since 1886. In other parks, too, falls are an issue.

In the spring of 2019, an Israeli teen hiking Yosemite's Mist Trail got caught up in the moment when he asked hiking companions to take a photo while performing a dangerous feat that he underestimated. This hotdogging stunt resulted in the young man **falling close to 600 feet** to his death.

During the first week of August 2019, Yosemite National Park reported **three injuries** from falls, including one fatality. In all cases, the people lost their footing when climbing on large rocks or boulders. Two of these individuals disregarded posted signs warning of the danger of stepping off the trail.

Even in the summer months, snow and ice can pose dangers during hikes. In July 2019, a European hiker in Grand Teton National Park **suffered serious injuries** after he walked on snow-covered rocks and lost his balance. He fell approximately 1,200 feet, where he was eventually rescued by a helicopter.



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## How to stay safe:

- Thrill-seekers are often tempted to get closer and closer to the edge of steep cliffs for the best shot. But staying safe is more important than an amazing Insta shot; use common sense at all times.
- Always pay attention to posted warning signs. They're there for a reason.
- Before heading out to the park, check the weather forecast and the condition of the trail, as well as the degree of difficulty along your intended route. Don't attempt anything you don't think you can handle.
- Pack ample food, water and gear in a backpack.
- Consider hiking with others rather than taking the risk of going solo.

## Drowning







Getty Images

Drowning has become one of the leading causes of unintentional visitor deaths at U.S. National Parks. According to Kupper, there were 58 drowning fatalities in 2013 resulting in approximately one death per week, and this trend looks poised to continue in the 2014-16 data set currently being finalized.

Swimming in a natural environment such as a river, stream, lake or ocean is very different from being in a controlled situation like an indoor or outdoor swimming pool. Currents and tides can be



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exceptionally dangerous to inexperienced swimmers. Likewise, weather conditions can sometimes change abruptly, with thunderstorms and flash floods resulting in life-threatening situations.

Records indicate that drowning fatalities can occur at every age, but younger, unaccomplished swimmers with a tendency for poor decision-making are at greatest risk. At the Indiana Dunes National Lakeshore, there have been **18 drowning deaths since 1995**. The victims have been overwhelmingly male — 13 compared to five females — and 14 of them have been under the age of 25.

This year alone, there have been a handful of youth drownings at national parks. In July, a 10-year-old boy's **body was recovered** in White Oak Creek in the Big South Fork National River and Recreation Area in Tennessee after 10 rescue agencies responded to the call of a possible drowning. A 16-year-old boy swimming with two companions in the New River Gorge National River in West Virginia **drowned after currents forced him downstream**, and a 19-year-old active duty soldier unexpectedly fell into the Rio Grande River while visiting Big Bend National Park in Texas. His body was eventually recovered by park officials.

The NPS has taken steps to implement improved safety measures for children and adolescents by partnering with Water Safety US. Their combined message is “Designate a Water Watcher – Supervision Could Save a Life.” While the NPS is endorsing this message, they also advocate that visitors swim in a lifeguarded-protected area.

### **How to stay safe:**

- If you're going for a swim, heed NPS's advice and designate someone to keep watch.
- Find out, either in advance of your arrival or at the Visitor Center, whether wading or swimming is allowed or prohibited and if lifeguards are on duty. The NPS site states that, "Some estimates indicate that the chance of drowning at a beach protected by lifeguards can be less than one in 18 million."

## Wildlife Attacks



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Nature-lovers seek out national parks in large part because of the incredible wildlife they contain. Observing a creature you've never before seen in the wild can provide an extraordinary visceral thrill. But these animals are wild, and on rare occasion, they do attack.

Over the course of a single week in late July 2019, two separate wildlife attacks were recorded. First, at Yellowstone National Park, a group of people stood within less than 10 feet of a bison. A 9-year-old girl became the victim of poor judgment when the irritated bison **launched**



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her into the air. Fortunately and incredibly, she escaped without serious injury.

Later that week, a 17-year-old visiting North Dakota's Theodore Roosevelt National Park was walking a trail when he was charged by a bison. "And then he came up behind me and he got his horn — slashed it through my leg," the teen, who wished to remain anonymous, told Today. "And then [he] threw me up with his head about six feet into the air." The teen, who went to the hospital but didn't suffer serious injuries, said he'd been keeping his distance from a nearby herd of some 50 bison.

Overall, wildlife attacks are very rare. Since 1979, for example, Yellowstone National Park has hosted over 118 million visits, and according to the National Park Service, "The probability of being killed by a bear in the park (8 incidents) is only slightly higher than the probability of being killed by a falling tree (7 incidents), in an avalanche (6 incidents), or being struck and killed by lightning (5 incidents)."

But despite the low risk of a serious issue, caution still needs to be taken.

### **How to stay safe:**

- As recommended by the NPS, keep a distance of at least 75 feet of space between yourself and bison, elk, bighorn sheep and moose. Faster moving animals such as bears and wolves require at least 300 feet.
- Exercise particular caution during calving seasons.

- Consider staying in more developed areas of the park. People who stay in developed areas, roadsides and boardwalks are considerably safer than visitors who plan to hike or camp in the backcountry.

## Getting Lost





The Grand Canyon is the only national park with its own fleet of unmanned aircraft and drones for reaching people who have gotten lost, stranded, injured or killed. Brandon Torres / Grand Canyon National Park via AP Photo



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National Park System sites collectively cover 85 million acres, and the terrain they contain is rugged and ever-changing. It should come as no surprise, then, that there are several recorded cases of people going missing at America's parks. Exact numbers are hard to come by, but there are at least **60 unresolved missing-person cases** in the National Park System.

The **oldest cold case** mentioned on the Investigative Services NPS site describes the disappearance of Dennis Lloyd Martin during a Father's

Day vacation at Great Smoky Mountains National Park in 1969. Martin, a 6-year-old boy, was playing with other children within close proximity to adult family members near the Appalachian Trail when he mysteriously disappeared. Fifty years later, the case remains unsolved and FOIA requests to the FBI have only produced redacted and incomplete information.

The list of missing persons also includes a park ranger named Paul Braxton Fugate. In 1980, he vanished while he was working at Arizona's Chiricahua National Monument. The NPS is offering a \$60,000 reward for information on the case. Even though the area has been searched numerous times, the authorities have no viable leads.

In 2010, a man went out for a solo hike at Joshua Tree National Park in California and was **never seen or heard from again**. He hasn't been found despite the efforts of online groups working doggedly to crack the case.

Fortunately, when people go missing in national parks, they're generally found.

In July 2019, to take a recent example, a New Jersey man suffering from dementia **disappeared from the Cataloochee Divide Trail** at Great Smoky Mountains National Park. The search efforts included canine units, helicopters, drones and 180 people from 30 agencies. For four days the missing man survived in the backcountry without any supplies. He was rescued by searchers when he responded to their calls.

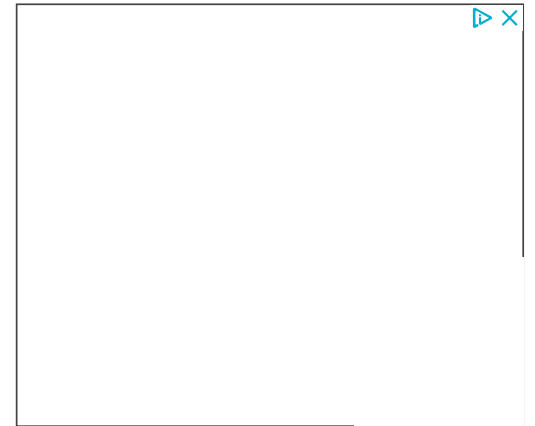


Between 2004 and 2014, approximately 93 percent of people who went missing were **located within 24 hours**, as compared to the less than 3 percent who were never found.

**How to stay safe:**

- Explore national parks with a partner or in a group; be careful about venturing out alone.
- Especially if you do travel alone, let people know where you're going and which part of the park you'll be exploring.
- Don't venture too far afield of designated hiking trails and viewing areas.

## Murders & Homicides





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The latest available FBI report from 2017 cited only seven murders and non-negligent manslaughters in U.S. National Parks. Murders and non-negligent manslaughters are often times random acts of violence. With such a wide range of national park sites, it's not possible to identify any places where you might be subjected to a greater likelihood of violence.

Even though the 2018 statistics have yet to be released, Kupper shared the locations for the seven incidents that happened in 2017: Two



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occurred in California at Point Reyes and at Joshua Tree. Three occurred in Tennessee at the Big South Fork, Great Smoky Mountains and Obed. One incident happened in Big Mead in Nevada and one occurred at Glen Canyon in Arizona.

Bodies discovered on NPS property are sometimes unrelated to park visits. The body of a woman reported missing by her husband in 2014 in Sonoma County was **discovered more than two years later** in the Point Reyes National Seashore in 2017, for example.

Catching murderers is dependent, of course, on evidence and detective work. Some homicide cases remain unsolved for decades. Such was the case of Julianne Williams and Laura Winans, two women who were **found murdered** in 1996 at their Shenandoah National Park campsite. Their wandering dog led park rangers to their campsite off the Bridle Trail near Skyland Resort. To this day, the NPS and the FBI maintain open files for this unsolved case.

Interestingly, while no one to date has attempted to test this NPS legal loophole, it is technically possible to get away with murder at Yellowstone's "**Zone of Death**," a 50-square-mile stretch of uninhabited land in the small Idaho part of the park. The U.S. Constitution mandates that the accused be prosecuted in the state of the crime, but if a fatal crime occurred in this region, a jury couldn't be produced since no one lives inside this particular section of NPS property.

**How to stay safe:**

- Exercise the same caution you would anywhere else. Be careful about traveling alone and when it gets dark, and pay attention to your surroundings at all times.

A large, empty rectangular box with a thin black border, likely intended for a drawing or additional notes.

Suicides

A large, empty rectangular box with a thin black border. In the top right corner, there is a small blue icon consisting of a right-pointing triangle and an 'X', which typically serves as a close or delete button in software interfaces.



Getty Images

In the NCHS Data Brief No. 330 published in 2018, the CDC reported that “from 1999 through 2017, the average adjusted suicide rate increased 33%...In 2016, suicide became the second leading cause of death for ages 10-34 and the fourth leading cause of death for ages 35-54.”

As the national suicide statistics have risen, so have the incidences in national parks. The [CDC's 2003-2009 Suicides in National Parks Report](#)





identified two parks — Blue Ridge Parkway and Grand Canyon — as having the most events.

Blue Ridge Parkway runs 469 miles from Shenandoah National Park in Virginia to Great Smoky Mountains National Park in Cherokee. This popular scenic road is often ranked as one of the top NPS destinations. Built during the Depression, it is a starting point for hikers seeking trails, scenic overlooks, streams and waterfalls. In 2018, 10 people committed suicide on the parkway, and to date **three people have done so already this year.**

Efforts have been underway for years to increase the safety of the 25-year-old Natchez Trace Bridge, which is located on the parkway. To date, 32 people have jumped off the bridge and died. Many advocates, including the sole suicide survivor, feel that **higher barriers will deter people** from jumping. Recent resolutions mandate a multi-year process which will hopefully lead to design changes in 2023.

### **How to stay safe:**

- If you're having suicidal thoughts, immediately contact the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline at 1-800-273-8255.

# Natural Disasters



Getty Images

In the wilderness, Mother Nature has complete control. The NPS takes **measures to respond** to natural disasters such as floods, fires, earthquakes, avalanches and severe storms, and in smaller park settings with limited equipment, NPS efforts are supported by local and state agencies.

Occasionally, freak tragedies occur. In August 2019, **falling rocks** near the east tunnel on the Going to the Sun Road at Glacier National Park



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struck a car. A 14-year-old passenger died and four others were injured as a result of this unforeseen incident.

Great Smoky Mountains National Park, the busiest national park in the country with 11.4 million visitors, was the site of another unusual accident in June 2019 when a tree **struck a Jeep Grand Cherokee** on Little River Road during a storm. The driver of the car died after the incident.

Other times, weather conditions merely cause delays and inconveniences. At Denali National Park in August 2019, hundreds of tourists were stranded when torrential rains resulted in mudslides and damage to the only road that winds through the park. Parts of the road were closed for an extended period of time and the Alaska Railroad temporarily stopped its service as well.

After Hawaii Volcanoes National Park was reopened in 2018 following a volcanic eruption, park rangers continued to assess the terrain's overall safety. **Barriers were erected** to prevent visitors from traversing on dangerous trails and roads, people were encouraged to wear protective eyewear in certain areas where volcanic ash was swirling in the air, and the Visitor Center provided updates on air quality.

### **How to stay safe:**

- Keep tabs on **NPS' list of active park alerts**, which contains information pertaining to various risks.



## Burns & Thermal Accidents



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Yellowstone National Park's hot springs are undoubtedly amazing. But they can also be dangerous.

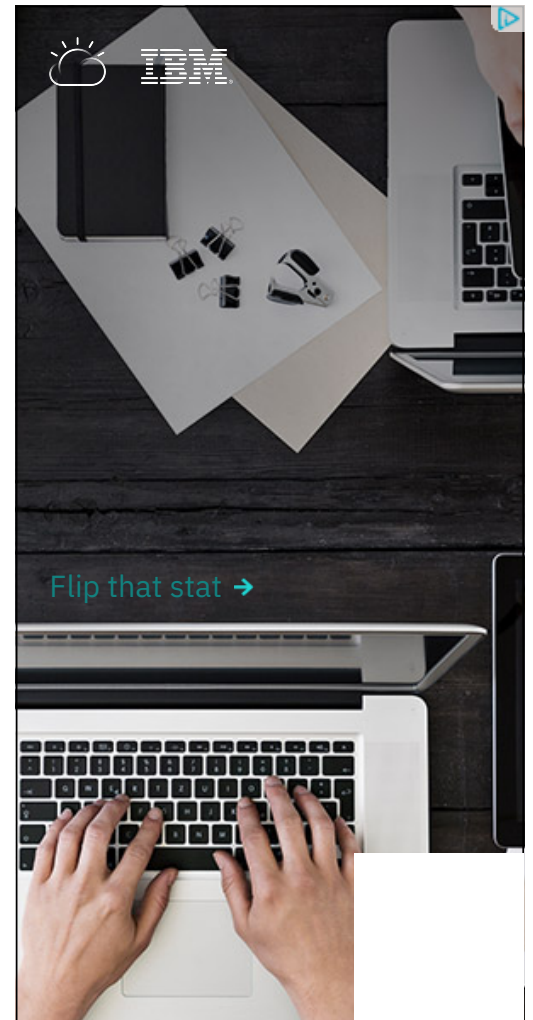
Between 2006 and 2016, at least 22 people died in the park's thermal springs. Writer Lee H. Whittelsey begins his book "Death in Yellowstone: Accidents and Foolhardiness in the First National Park" by citing a 1981 incident in which a man jumped into 202-degree Fahrenheit hot springs to retrieve his friend's dog and ended up with third-degree burns over 100 percent of his body.

More recently, in 2016, a man [fell into a boiling hot spring](#) and dissolved after trying to go for a soak. In 2017, a North Carolina man suffered severe burns after falling into a hot spring.

With close to 10,000 hot springs, it is unreasonable to expect guardrails around all the steaming-hot perimeters. So this one mostly comes down to exercising good common sense.

### **How to stay safe:**

- Stay in areas marked as safe, and pay attention to posted warning signs.
- As is mandated, keep dogs on a leash at all times to prevent them from jumping into the springs.
- Do not attempt, under any circumstances, to bathe, soak or dip into a hot spring!



## Boat & Rafting Accidents



A hiker takes a photo from the top of Vernal Falls in Yosemite, Wednesday, July 20, 2011. Gosia Wozniacka / AP Photo

National parks offer a plethora of opportunities for kayakers, canoers, sailors, rafters, jet skiers and paddle boarders. But individuals who



participate in water-based sports needs to recognize that natural bodies of water can be subject to changing weather patterns and include unpredictable features.

A 4th of July rafting experience turned to tragedy earlier this year when a commercial raft on a Class III rapid on the Green River at Dinosaur National Monument in Utah got **stuck on a rock**. A California passenger fell into the river, became unresponsive while being rescued and succumbed to his injuries.

Similarly, Grand Teton National Park **lost one of its rafting guides** during a May 2019 trip on the Snake River. The guide died while trying to free his raft from a log that it got snagged on.

Some boating and rafting trips also include time on land, especially when people are getting in and out of a boat and walking along rocky or slippery shorelines. And alcohol can play a significant role in accidents. According to **BoatUS Foundation**, nearly half of all boating accidents involve alcohol. Operating a boat while intoxicated is not just unwise, but a federal offense that comes with a \$1,000 fine.

Driving under the influence was the cause of a fatal boating accident at Lake Powell, part of the Glen Canyon National Recreation Area, in June 2019. After the vessel hit a rock, one of the eight passengers was catapulted onto the shoreline and **died from the injuries**.

To combat this issue, Operation Dry Water works with law enforcement agencies in 56 states and territories to **help educate** people about the

dangers of boating under the influence of drugs and alcohol. In June, Glen Canyon National Recreation Area **joined the effort**.

### **How to stay safe:**

- Getting on and off a boat requires balance and concentration. Proper shoes will go a long way to preventing falls.
- The importance of wearing life jackets should not be minimized. And, yes, this even holds true for accomplished swimmers. While the NPS does not offer statistics pinpointing the relationship between fatalities and lifejacket usage, the latest stats from the U.S. Coast Guard show drowning as the cause of death in 76 percent of all 2017 fatalities. Nearly 85 percent of those who drowned were **not wearing a life jacket**.
- Be careful about alcohol consumption while operating any sort of water vessel.



## Climbing Accidents



Getty Images

Climbing accidents are relatively rare — at Yosemite, for instance, there are about 100 climbing-related accidents annually and an average of 51 deaths. Relative to the 25,000-50,000 climber-days that take place at the park each year, this is low.

But, **NPS notes**, “It’s much too high...if your climbing career is cut short by a broken hip, or worse.”

Even serious, cautious climbers can find themselves in harm’s way. In June 2019 in Yosemite, for example, a California teacher who often went



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rock-climbing died during a **rappelling accident**. The next month, an experienced adventurer **lost his life** while climbing at Denali National Park.

### **How to stay safe:**

- Approximately 40 percent of the climbing accidents at Yosemite have been caused by mistakes made with climbing gear. Make sure your gear is in great condition, and you know exactly how to use it, before attempting a climb.
- Come prepared for the possibility of extremely cold temperatures, which can make climbing more difficult and dangerous.
- Don't attempt anything you're not prepared for. Climbing takes considerable experience and skill, especially when scaling challenging peaks.

## General Tips on Staying Safe



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Park rangers, local authorities and medical personnel work together to ensure the well-being of all park guests. Despite this, visitors should realize that their overall welfare is dependent on being aware of their surroundings, using common sense and following the park's safety tips.

Here are some general steps park visitors can take to stay safe:

- With improved coverage, cell phones can sometimes be used to report serious and life-threatening incidents. But be aware that many remote areas still do not have any cell phone service. A satellite phone

may be a consideration if you are concerned about the possibility of trekking miles for help.

- Since cell phone reception is unreliable it is also recommended to implement an emergency plan and let family members know intended routes before leaving home.
- National Parks offer trails with varying degrees of difficulty and duration. Before starting off on an adventure, make sure that everyone in your group has experience levels matching the ability level of the hike. Know that paths at 8,000 feet above sea level or higher may be problematic for people coming from sea level or for those with diagnosed health conditions. If the weather isn't optimal, it may be safer to delay the adventure than to trek in deteriorating conditions.
- Visitors should pack sunglasses, sunscreen and a hat for sun protection along with extra clothing or a jacket for changing weather conditions. Even for short walks, it's advisable to carry light snacks and sufficient water for continual nourishment and hydration. Some parks have limited water supplies, so it may be necessary to pick up water before entering the park.
- Even though trails are usually well marked, it is also advisable to carry a map and a compass, or to have access to a GPS-guided map.
- Outdoor adventures in more remote areas and in water environments are filled with uncertainties. Staying focused and alert to one's surroundings will lessen the likelihood of making an unwise decision.

Taking a proactive approach prior to arrival, and asking questions from park rangers upon arrival, will counteract the possibility of becoming a

National Park statistic.

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# What to Do in America's Most Popular National Parks

By [Sarah Kuta](#) on August 20, 2019