

Wellness Newsletter

Awareness Contributes to Safe Journey

By Karen O'Hara

AUGUST 2018

I recently enjoyed a two-week tent camping trip with my sister that involved a 3,000 mile round-trip drive from California to Wyoming.

Other than an encounter with a projectile that cracked the windshield on the driver's side, we didn't have any unfortunate incidents to report when we arrived home. I attribute this partly to luck and patience, and largely to practicing health and safety awareness.

However, we frequently observed avoidable, risky behaviors in which common-sense precautions were left by the wayside.

Wildlife Sightings

Millions of people visit national parks and other wilderness areas to be close to nature. It's especially thrilling to see wildlife. The problem is that some people disregard safety warnings, putting themselves, others and animals at risk of injury or death. What we saw:

- In Yellowstone, a family with two small children pulled halfway off the road, jumped out and sprinted across to pose next to a bison.
- A wolf sighting halted traffic and eager onlookers charged off in pursuit of the pack.
- A pedestrian was nearly struck by a car while observing an elk grazing by the road.
- In Grand Teton, an animated group of adults and children wearing family reunion t-shirts chased a protective mother bear with two cubs.



Bison resting near a boardwalk allows for a safe close-up shot.

What Can You Do?

With regard to wildlife, remember, it's their home. Humans are usually tolerated until we do something perceived as threatening. Helpful hints:

- Store food and other items with an odor in a bear-proof box or canister.
- When observing, avoid sudden movement and keep a safe distance.
- Hike with other people and be observant; if dogs are allowed, use a leash.
- If you feel threatened, do not run; follow advice provided by experts.
- When hiking and backpacking, rangers recommend carrying bear spray.

Thermal and Water Hazards

We were surprised how some people ignore safety warnings. Yellowstone has miles of boardwalks to protect sensitive habitats and prevent people from falling through thin surface crusts in thermal areas, yet shoe prints that will mar the landscape for decades are clearly visible.

Similarly, we observed unsafe behavior around cold, swift-running water, including climbing over guardrails at waterfalls. Perhaps the most egregious case was in Lava Hot Springs, Idaho, where inner-tubing is popular. I saw one family riding the rapids with an infant. When I asked a local resident about it, he said people drown or are injured every year – typically because they have been drinking alcohol, disobey warnings and launch above the falls, or don't wear foot protection and a life vest.

On the other hand, we also saw river rafts fully equipped with safety gear on the Snake River with relaxed-looking tourists accompanied by guides for added reassurance.



A ranger uses a grabber to remove hats, maps and other litter in a sensitive thermal area.

What Can You Do?

Obey all warnings against swimming in cold and/or swift water. Exposure to extremely cold water can quickly cause hypothermia. Similarly, do not go in hot springs without first determining whether the temperature is safe. Limit the time you soak and stay well-hydrated. When rafting, boating or fishing, wear a life vest.

Road Warriors

On the interstate, two-lane highways and mountain roads, we encountered all types of vehicles – including SUVs with kayaks on top, motorcycles, behemoth motor homes towing cars and logging trucks. While most motorists complied with rules of the road, a notable percentage were oblivious, discourteous or outright dangerous.

Edge of disaster on Highway 89.



We saw drivers pull slowly out in front of speeding oncoming traffic, ignore pullouts, go slow in the fast lane, speed in the slow lane, weave in and out of traffic, and tailgate. After committing a risky maneuver, many drivers excused their behavior with a desultory wave, or worse, a glare as if the other party was in the wrong.

These types of behaviors can have serious consequences. On Highway 89 outside of Jackson, WY, we passed an accident in the Snake River Canyon involving multiple vehicles, including a sedan with airbags deployed and an overturned truck hanging off the edge. Just a day earlier, the *East Idaho News* reported a fatal accident on a different section of the same highway. A man was ejected from his car when it hit an embankment; he wasn't wearing a seatbelt.

What Can You Do?

In 2017, more than 40,000 people died in motor vehicle crashes in the U.S. according to the [National Safety Council](#). The leading causes of serious injuries and fatalities are impairment by alcohol and other substances, unsafe speed and driving while distracted. Cell phones, passengers, eating and grooming are among common distractions.

Here are some driver-safety reminders:

- Always wear your seatbelt and use correctly installed child safety seats.
- Do not use handheld devices to text, talk or enter GPS directions while driving.
- Do not drive while impaired by a substance, including some prescribed medications.
- On long trips, alternate drivers and take frequent refreshment/stretch breaks.
- Park in a safe place and take a power nap if you feel drowsy during the day.
- Do not drive past the point of fatigue; stop somewhere for the night.
- Monitor teenage drivers to ensure they comply with safety rules.
- Be courteous to others and don't follow too closely, especially at high speeds.

It's safer and better for your health to travel with a companion. Under any circumstances, pack a first aid kit, wear sunscreen and a hat, and take along plenty of water.

It's way more fun to be safe than sorry.

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