

More Safety Considerations for Outdoor Photographers

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Bret Edge, writing his thoughtful piece on [Safety Considerations for Outdoor Photographers](#), focused his discussion on dangers from criminals that photographers may face in the field. While I don't mean to trivialize those risks, I don't think those are necessarily the greatest ones.

Unless photographers are different than other outdoor enthusiasts, far more photographers are likely to get hurt as a result of underestimating the wilderness rather than by criminals. By "underestimating the wilderness," I don't mean attacks by wild animals - I mean failing to take into account how far you can be from help if the weather changes, if you get yourself lost, or if you injure yourself.

In the past I have been a volunteer for a rescue group in Interior Alaska. Every year, the rescue group spends a lot of time and effort looking for individuals who were paying more attention to stalking an animal for the perfect shot rather than to where they were, how late it was, or what the sky was doing. Generally, these folks get found without too much damage to themselves but there have been injuries, very close calls, and even fatalities. In this article, I'll offer some tips for minimizing your risk of injury.

First, if you can, don't go off alone. Yes, I know it's hard enough to get away to take the photos when it's just you, and if you have to find someone else it's that much harder. But you are much safer in the wilderness with a buddy. If you break a leg, there's someone to go for help, or to gather wood for a fire, or to keep you warm.

Second, always let someone responsible know where you are going and when you will be back. Pilots file flight plans for a reason. You should too. Once you have told someone your plans, stick to that plan. In the 1980's, the local rescue group spent long hours looking for a missing hiker only to discover she had decided on impulse to hike a different trail and hadn't told anyone. If you are walking a trail and it has a registration kiosk, use it.

Third, if you can, carry communications gear. It saves lives. A cell phone is a good start if you are sure you will be able to reach the cell phone network. If you are unsure, consider a satellite phone. Prices are not as high as you might think. REI, for example, offers a satellite phone and 100 prepaid minutes for \$750.00. That's probably a tenth of the cost of the camera gear you are lugging around.

Fourth, carry - and know how to use - a GPS device or at least a compass, and a map. In foggy conditions your choices narrow unless you have a dependable way of finding your way back to the car. GPS technology is affordable, reliable, and precise. If you mark your starting point and use a backtrack feature, you can find our way out even in the dark so long as the batteries hold out.

Fifth, carry survival gear - matches, a knife, or multipurpose tool, an extra layer of insulation and rain gear, a First-Aid kit, and some emergency rations. Even a few energy bars can make a big difference when you are trying to stay warm on a cold night.

Yes, I know the camera bag is already heavy without adding a cell phone, satellite phone, a GPS receiver, food, and clothing. Yes, I know that you may never need any of that stuff. But one careless step and a twisted ankle, and you will be in a lot better shape if you have the gear along. With a satellite phone and a GPS you can tell the authorities precisely where you are, to within thirty feet.



Sixth, if you do get lost or hurt, move to a place where you can be seen from the air if possible and stay there. I speak from experience here. It's much easier to find someone who is staying in one place than it is to find someone who is wandering around. Also the chances of hurting yourself are reduced if you stay in one place. As you get colder and hungrier, your judgment will become impaired. That's less likely to be a problem if you aren't moving.

If the weather gets really bad, think before moving. As a general principle, wait out the wet but move if it's cold. Keep as warm and dry as possible. Stop moving before you become exhausted, get your fire built and your shelter rigged.

Seventh and last, the best way to handle the risk of getting lost is not to get lost in the first place. Pay attention to conditions, and keep track of where you are at all times. If you leave a trail, pay special attention; it's all too easy to lose the trail. If you are waiting for that special late afternoon light five miles from the car, ask yourself how you will get out in the dark. If, like me, you are from the northern latitudes, keep in mind how quickly it can get pitch dark in southern latitudes. Ask yourself what that clean, dry trail will be like if those threatening clouds turn into a thunderstorm. If it becomes foggy, will you be able to find and stay on the trail?

Orient yourself often. Stop, look around, identify which way is north and which way your car is. Look at your watch and check the time. If you are not certain of where you are, stop moving until you do. Sometimes we can get so focused on the photo that we ignore or forget the other important stuff. If you can train yourself to do a quick orientation regularly, you reduce the chances of an embarrassing incident, at least.

Lastly, use common sense. If that inner voice is trying to tell you that you are doing something stupid - listen to it, especially if the conditions are marginal at the start.

Like Bret Edge, I'm not trying to scare you or to keep you from going out in the wilderness. But if you can follow these tips you can keep yourself safe while you are out there.

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