

Escape from Unfriendly Natives - Tips for avoiding bears, skunks, snakes & ticks

While you're out doing your Scout thing, you may come in contact with some of these guys in their neighborhood.

Ticks: Scan your body before dinner and while taking a post-hike shower, paying special attention to your armpits, the back of your knees, and in and around any hair. To remove a burrowing tick, grasp it tightly just behind the head with sharp tweezers as close to the skin as possible. Pull upwards in a slow, steady movement. Do not squeeze the tick's body. Do not twist or pull quickly; this causes the mouthparts to break off and remain in the skin.

Raccoon: Beware of Rabies! If a raccoon is too friendly or acting erratically suspect it rabid, keep everyone away from it and report it immediately to the ranger. If a raccoon has become accustomed to handouts and human garbage, it becomes a pest and will keep coming back. Bang the side of the dumpster, prior to lifting the lid. It gives any raccoon, time to climb out before you surprise it and it surprises you!

Skunk: Loud noises and sudden movements might make a nearsighted skunk turn and raise its tail. Back away while speaking in a low calming voice. A skunk can shoot its oily stink as far as 10 feet.

Opossum: Nocturnal, Opossums are usually solitary and nomadic. When threatened or harmed, they will "play possum", mimicking the appearance and smell of a sick or dead animal. The lips are drawn back, teeth are bared, saliva foams around the mouth, and a foul-smelling fluid is secreted from the anal glands. The physiological response is involuntary, rather than a conscious act. Their stiff, curled form can be prodded, turned over, and even carried away. The animal will regain consciousness after a period of minutes or hours and escape. Leave them alone, don't poke or kick them.

Snapping Turtle: Snapping turtles are very aggressive animals and should be treated with extreme caution. Common habitats are shallow ponds and lakes, or slow-running streams or brackish environments. They tend to camouflage themselves into the background to hunt. "Snappers" can snap with surprising speed, reach and power. They can stretch their necks halfway back across their own carapace to bite. Their claws are sharp and capable of inflicting significant injuries. Even a small snapper is relatively powerful for its size, with long sharp claws; further, due to their aquatic habits, these turtles are often slimy and wet, and are good at causing prospective handlers to lose their grip. If one is found near a camp site, post a watch and keep others away from the danger. Notify a ranger of its presents.

Coyotes: Coyotes are the largest wild predator in the Chicago region and serve a vital role in the balance of our local ecosystems. They help maintain the populations of many small mammals including mice and rabbits. They also feed on deer fawns and Canada goose eggs. Coyotes shy away from humans; however, they have been known to infrequently prey upon cats and small dogs. Coyotes see dogs in their territory as a potential threat. If you walk your dog in an open space area, it is particularly important to keep your dog on a short leash. Do not let your dog approach a coyote, and keep in mind that a coyote approaching you or observing you is not typically a sign of aggression. Often the coyote is just curious. Simply shouting and waving your arms will scare it off and will reinforce its natural fear of people. Like a dog, do NOT run from it, it will chase you.

Rattlesnake: Rattlers can strike from a distance as far as half their body length--typically 2 to 3 feet. Let the snake slip away, or walk around it. When scrambling up rocky trails, watch where you put your hands, especially on sunny ledges. Ankle-high or taller all-leather hiking boots can deflect strikes.

Water Moccasins (Cottonmouth) Snakes: The water moccasin, North America's only venomous water snake, has a distinctive blocky, triangular head; a thick body; and a dangerous bite. Water moccasins rarely bite humans however, and only attack when threatened. They are semiaquatic, so they're happy both swimming in water and basking on land in their native range in the southeastern United States. Water moccasins eat fish; birds; small mammals; amphibians; reptiles such as lizards, baby alligators and turtles; and other snakes.

Black Bear: Try to appear as large as possible by raising your arms and even your pack over your head. Shout and slowly back away. If a black bear attacks, fight back aggressively. With any type of bear--grizzly or black--turning around and running will encourage a footrace you won't win.

Wolves: Wolves are shy and generally avoid humans. Most people will never see a wolf, let alone have a conflict with one. Wolves can, however, lose their fear of humans through habituation and may approach camping areas, homes or humans. When this happens, there is an increased possibility for conflict between wolves and humans. If a wolf acts aggressively (growls or snarls) or fearlessly (approaches humans at a close distance without fear) take the following actions: Raise your arms and wave them in the air to make yourself look larger; Yell, make noise and throw objects — sticks, stones, pans— at the wolf; Back away slowly; do not turn your back on the wolf —especially if its head is lowered; Keep direct eye contact.

Mountain Lion / Cougar: Attacks on humans are rare, as cougar prey recognition is a learned behavior and they do not generally recognize humans as prey. Attacks are most frequent during late spring and summer, when juvenile cougars leave their mothers and search for new territory. As with many predators, a cougar may attack if cornered, if a fleeing human stimulates their instinct to chase by running, or if a person "plays dead." Use the "buddy system:", the more the better. Try to appear as large as possible by raising your arms and even your pack/jacket over your head. Shout loudly, but calming and slowly back away. Exaggerating the threat to the animal through intense eye contact, and any other action to appear larger and more menacing, outnumber it by bringing the rest of your group together may make the animal retreat. Fighting back with sticks and rocks, or even bare hands, is often effective in persuading an attacking cougar to disengage.

Grizzly Bear: Avoid eye contact, speak in a low voice, and back away slowly. If it charges, hold your ground and attempt to look as large as possible. Some charges are bluffs. If the grizzly attacks, lie flat on your stomach, lace your hands over the back of your neck, and play dead.

If you encounter any wild animal that normally wouldn't come near a human: One possibility is it has rabies. The only certain way to determine if an animal has rabies is through a blood test. However, since the disease is an infection of the central nervous system, certain physical symptoms indicate illness. A change in behavior is the first sign. Be familiar with common wild animal behaviors in order to recognize strange ones. For example, raccoons, skunks, and bats are not often seen during daylight hours. Bats rarely lay on the ground or other flat surfaces. Rabid animals might act unusually friendly or aloof or aggressive. As the disease progresses, animals might go into convulsions, stagger about or foam at the mouth.

Another possibility is the animal has lost its nature fear of humans. Wild animals need to remain wild, injuries occur when wild animals become fearless of human's due to habituation. Feeding that little cub might be cute when it's small, but when it grows, it can become a pest or a danger if it encounters another human.

Guidelines to follow to reduce the chance of conflict while visiting the back country:

- Do not feed wild animals.
- Dispose of all food and garbage in cans with secure lids.
- Do not entice wild animals to come closer.
- Do not purposely approach wild animals.
- Do not attempt to restrict or block their movement.
- Leave a path or area open for a wild animal to leave.
- Do not allow wild animals to approach any closer than 300 feet; began to back away slowly if being approached; determine your escape route.
- Keep pets near you at all times. Coyotes see dogs in their territory as a potential threat or an easy meal.
- Remember they are not domestic pets, e.g., a large German Shepherd.
- While camping, cook, wash dishes and store food away from sleeping areas.
- Pack out or dispose of garbage and leftover food properly.
- Suspend food, toiletries and garbage out of reach of any wildlife.
- Have another person with you —always a good rule!