

Solo Hiker Safety Handbook

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PLB devices, communication plans, navigation without cell signal, emergency protocols & self-rescue techniques for solo Alaska hiking.

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Alaska Solo Hiker Safety Handbook

As a solo hiker in Alaska, you are embarking on an adventure of a lifetime. The vast wilderness, breathtaking landscapes, and unparalleled wildlife viewing opportunities make Alaska a paradise for outdoor enthusiasts. However, solo hiking in Alaska comes with unique risks that demand respect, preparation, and a deep understanding of safety protocols. This comprehensive handbook is designed to equip you with the knowledge and skills necessary to minimize risks and stay safe in the Alaskan wilderness.

Solo Hiking Risk Assessment

While solo hiking can be a thrilling experience, it's essential to acknowledge the risks involved. According to the National Park Service, solo hikers are more likely to experience accidents and fatalities than group hikers. In Alaska, the risks are even higher due to the state's vast and remote wilderness, unpredictable weather, and abundant wildlife. The Alaska State Troopers report that solo hikers are more likely to be involved in search and rescue (SAR) operations than group hikers.

Despite these risks, solo hiking can be a deeply rewarding experience, allowing for introspection, self-discovery, and a sense of accomplishment. With proper planning, preparation, and safety measures, solo hikers can minimize their risks and enjoy the beauty of Alaska's wilderness.

Personal Locator Beacons (PLB) Complete Guide

A Personal Locator Beacon (PLB) is a crucial safety device for solo hikers in Alaska. A PLB sends a distress signal to the COSPAS-SARSAT satellite network, which alerts authorities to your location in the event of an emergency. Here's how PLBs work:

- PLBs transmit a signal on the 406 MHz frequency, which is received by the COSPAS-SARSAT satellite network.
- The signal is then relayed to the nearest rescue center, which dispatches SAR teams to your location.
- PLBs are free to activate, but you must register your device with the NOAA (beaconregistration.noaa.gov) before use.

Some of the best PLBs for Alaska include:

- ACR ResQLink 400: A compact and lightweight PLB with a built-in GPS and strobe light. (\$250)
- Ocean Signal rescueME: A compact and waterproof PLB with a built-in GPS and strobe light. (\$300)

When to activate your PLB:

- Only activate your PLB in life-threatening situations, such as a serious injury or illness, or if you are stranded in a remote area with no means of communication.

- Be aware that SAR responses can be costly, and unnecessary activations can divert resources from genuine emergencies.

Satellite Communicators

Satellite communicators, such as Garmin inReach Mini 2, SPOT, and Zoleo, offer two-way messaging and GPS tracking, allowing you to stay in touch with family and friends and send distress signals in emergency situations. Here's a comparison of these devices:

- Garmin inReach Mini 2: A compact and lightweight device with two-way messaging, GPS tracking, and a built-in compass. (\$350)
- SPOT: A device with one-way messaging and GPS tracking, but no built-in compass. (\$200)
- Zoleo: A device with two-way messaging and GPS tracking, but no built-in compass. (\$250)

Subscription costs vary depending on the device and service plan, but expect to pay around \$10-20 per month for basic plans.

Communication Plans

A communication plan is essential for solo hikers in Alaska. Here's what you need to do:

- Leave a float plan: Inform a trusted friend or family member of your itinerary, including your route, expected return time, and emergency contact information.
- Check-in schedule: Establish a regular check-in schedule with your emergency contact, using a satellite communicator or PLB.
- Missed check-in: If you miss a check-in, your emergency contact should alert authorities, who will initiate a SAR operation.
- Emergency contact: Designate a trusted friend or family member as your emergency contact, and ensure they have your itinerary and contact information.

Navigation Without Cell Service

Alaska's vast wilderness often means no cell service. Here's how to navigate without it:

- Download offline maps: Use apps like Gaia GPS, AllTrails, or CalTopo to download maps of your route.
- Compass and topo map basics: Learn to use a compass and read topo maps to navigate.
- UTM coordinates: Understand how to use UTM coordinates to locate yourself on a map.

Emergency Protocols

In the event of an emergency, follow the STOP protocol:

- Stop: Remain calm and assess the situation.

- Think: Evaluate your options and resources.
- Observe: Take note of your surroundings and potential hazards.
- Plan: Develop a plan to address the emergency, including signaling for rescue if necessary.

Priority order in an emergency:

- Shelter: Find or create shelter to protect yourself from the elements.
- Water: Locate a source of water or ration your existing supply.
- Signal: Use a fire, smoke, or other signals to alert rescuers to your location.
- Food: Ration your food supply and avoid expending energy on non-essential activities.

Weather Assessment Skills

Alaska's weather can be unpredictable and deadly. Here's how to assess the weather:

- Read clouds: Learn to recognize cloud types and their associated weather patterns.
- Wind shifts: Monitor wind direction and speed to anticipate changes in the weather.
- Turn around: Know when to turn back due to deteriorating weather conditions.
- Micro-climate traps: Be aware of Alaska's unique micro-climates, such as valley fog or coastal wind patterns, which can trap you in hazardous conditions.

Self-Rescue Basics

In the event of an injury or illness, know how to self-rescue:

- Sprained ankle: Use the RICE method (rest, ice, compression, elevation) and create an improvised splint.
- Hypothermia: Recognize early signs (shivering, confusion, drowsiness) and treat with warmth, shelter, and hydration.
- Blister management: Prevent blisters with proper footwear and treat them with moleskin and antibiotics.
- Improvised shelter: Learn to create a shelter using natural materials, such as branches and leaves.

Wildlife Encounters Alone

Alaska is home to an abundance of wildlife, including bears, moose, and other predators. Here's how to stay safe:

- Bear spray: Carry bear spray and know how to use it.
- No running: Never run from a bear or other wildlife, as this can trigger an attack.
- Mom and cubs: Never approach or get between a mother bear and her cubs.

- **Moose:** Be aware that moose are more dangerous than bears statistically, and take precautions to avoid them.

Alaska-Specific Hazards

Alaska has unique hazards that demand special attention:

- **Glacial outwash crossings:** Be cautious when crossing glacial outwash streams, which can be treacherous and unpredictable.
- **Post-holing:** Avoid post-holing in late snow, which can be deep and exhausting.
- **Coastal zone tides:** Be aware of tidal patterns and avoid getting trapped by rising tides.
- **River ice:** Be cautious when crossing river ice in spring, which can be unstable and treacherous.

In conclusion, solo hiking in Alaska requires a deep respect for the wilderness, a thorough understanding of safety protocols, and a commitment to preparation and planning. By following the guidelines outlined in this handbook, you can minimize your risks and enjoy the beauty and adventure of Alaska's vast wilderness. Remember, safety is a personal responsibility, and it's up to you to take the necessary precautions to stay safe in the Alaskan wilderness.