

# HIKING SAFETY<sup>1</sup>

The main consideration when hiking in the mountains is **safety**. **You** should always be aware that you are entering a wilderness area. The mountains and the elements can be very unforgiving. You need to prepare accordingly.

## Sun

Because of the high elevations, the sun shines hot and intense with UV rays. Skin cancer is a serious health risk for residents of New Mexico. Exposure to the sun in the middle of the day can quickly lead to painful sunburn. Be sure to protect your skin with a generous application of sunscreen while hiking. Sunscreen lotion wears off the skin from sweating and rubbing against clothes, so reapply every few hours on a long hike. UV radiation from the sun is most intense between about 10 a.m. and 3 p.m. In summer months, try to plan your hike for early in the morning to avoid the heat and intense sunshine of midday. (See also the discussion of heat exhaustion, further on.) A broad-brimmed hat keeps the sun off of your face, neck, and ears. Wearing long sleeves and pants protects you from the sun, as well as from scratches from low-lying trees and shrubs.

## Snow

Hiking in the snow can be fun and invigorating but also potentially dangerous. Be very cautious when hiking into snow. From November through April some portions of the mountain, especially the upper portions of La Luz Trail, are impassible due to snow coverage. **Do not** try to hike through deep snow (higher than your knee) when dressed in a light jacket, jeans, and tennis shoes. Incredibly, many people do, and they run severe risk of hypothermia or even death. If you run into such snow and are unprepared for it, simply **turn around** and hike back to your car. (Hypothermia risks and first aid are also discussed later.)

When planning to hike in snow, the main considerations are keeping warm and dry. Dress in layers that can be added or removed to prevent overheating. Wear a warm cap (for example, a stocking cap) that can be pulled down over your ears and face, waterproof gloves or mittens, water-repellant trousers, and gaiters to keep snow out of your boots. Traction aids, such as microspikes that fit over the soles of your hiking boots, can be very helpful when the winter trails are slick.

## Weather Patterns

Although the Albuquerque area is generally very dry, afternoon thunder- showers in the Sandia Mountains are quite common, especially during the monsoon season of July through September. Dangers from a sudden mountain storm include lightning, hail, flash

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<sup>1</sup> from *Sandia Mountain Hiking Guide: Revised and Expanded Edition* by Mike Coltrin, copyright 2019 University of New Mexico Press, pp 10-16

flood, and hypothermia. Always take along rain gear when hiking in the Sandias. You can avoid most thunderstorms, as well as the afternoon heat, by planning your hikes for earlier in the day.

## **Lightning**

New Mexico has the highest rate of deaths due to lightning per capita in the United States. The sound of a thunderclap from lightning takes about five seconds per mile to reach your ears. You can estimate how far away a lightning strike is by counting the time delay between the flash and the sound of thunder. Should you find yourself on the mountain in an approaching thunderstorm, take immediate precautions. Avoid high, exposed places, such as ridges or lone trees. Seek low, treeless areas and squat on two feet to lower your profile and reduce the risk of lightning strike. Do not shelter in a cave unless its depth is at least three times its opening distance. Take off your backpack and place it at least 30 feet away from you to distance yourself from any metal or electronic gear that you may be carrying.

Planning your hike for early in the day, before afternoon thundershowers typically arise, is the best way to avoid the potential dangers of lightning.

## **Flash Floods**

Afternoon thunderstorms are usually short in duration but are sometimes quite intense. Should such conditions arise, stay clear of arroyos and steep, narrow canyons. Runoff from heavy rain draining into the narrow slot of a canyon can cause a flash flood with rapidly rising water and frightening intensity. If you are caught in such a situation, immediately climb to higher ground, rather than vainly attempting to rush down-stream ahead of the rising water. A flash flood can arise even when the sky overhead is dry and clear if a storm is raging farther above you on the mountain.

## **Rattlesnakes**

There are rattlesnakes in the Sandia Mountains, the most common species being the western diamondback. Rattlesnakes are usually, but not always, found below 8,000 feet elevation. Rattlesnakes are most active at night when it is cooler. For this reason, if you hike at night always use a flashlight (not only to spot a rattlesnake in your path but also to avoid hazards such as rocks and drop-offs in the trail). You cannot solely depend on a rattlesnake to alert you to its presence with its characteristic rattle sound, so always keep an eye on your surroundings.

To avoid a hiding rattlesnake, never reach into holes, crevices, or places you cannot see. Do not touch or attempt to move a rattlesnake if you encounter one. Seek immediate treatment from a medical professional if bitten; most wilderness guides recommend against attempting treatment for snakebite in the field.

## **Bears**

Black bears are the only bear species in the Sandia Mountains. I have seen bears many times on my hikes, usually within a few miles of Sandia Crest. The bear population in the Sandias fluctuates but is now estimated in the range of 50 or fewer.

If you encounter a bear, it will most likely be frightened of you and run away. If you should see a bear before it sees you, make your presence known by speaking in a conversational tone of voice and slowly waving your arms. Both the sound and the action uniquely identify you as human (as opposed to some other animal), and the bear will likely run away. Avoid direct eye contact, which could be interpreted by the bear as a sign of aggression. In the extremely unlikely event that a black bear should attack you, fight back with all of your might, using any objects that you can (hiking stick, rock, knife).

Never feed a bear (or other wildlife) in the mountains. Doing so will make the animal associate human contact with an easy source of food. The bear will begin to lose its fear of humans, which will ultimately lead to its death by game officials.

The Sandia Mountain BearWatch is an organization to educate people on how to live with wildlife and to protect the black bear in New Mexico. See their website at [www.sandiamountainbearwatch.org](http://www.sandiamountainbearwatch.org) for more information. Or to contact to contact them by mail write to Sandia Mountain BearWatch, PO Box 591, Tijeras, NM 87059.

## **Poison Ivy**

Poison ivy is common in damp areas along some trails in the Sandia Mountains. The best defense against poison ivy is to learn to identify the plant by its shiny green leaves in groups of three and avoid contact. Long pants and sleeves protect skin from direct contact with poison ivy. However, the oil (urushiol) from the plant can cling to clothes and can still cause a rash upon later exposure to the skin. Wash your skin with soap and water if exposed to poison ivy, as well as all clothing if you may have walked through it. If a rash develops, over-the-counter medications will usually suffice.

## **Plague**

Visitors might be surprised to learn that fleas carrying bubonic plague can sometimes be found in New Mexico. Stay away from any dead rodents that you might come across while in the wilderness. When hiking with a dog, it might be tempted to investigate a dead rodent encountered along the way. Fleas carrying plague could easily be transferred to your pet (and then to you), so keep dogs away from this potential hazard.

## **Heat Exhaustion**

Overexertion in the New Mexico sun can lead to heat exhaustion or even heat stroke. Commonsense precautions will go a long way toward avoiding this situation. These include planning your hike for early morning during the summer, dressing in lightweight clothing, wearing a hat to shield your face and head from the sun, and drinking plenty of water along the way. Signs of heat exhaustion include dizziness or light headedness, confusion, nausea, and a quickened pulse. Should these signs occur, have the victim lie down in the shade, apply a damp cloth to his or her face and upper body, and have the victim slowly drink water.

## **Hypothermia**

Hypothermia is the condition of abnormally low body temperature. More people actually die of hypothermia during summer than winter. However, proper preparation should make your risk very low. The main causes hypothermia are cold, wind, and being wet. Prepare for the worst we possible. Bring complete body protection and put it on **before** becoming cold. Eat snacks along your hike, which provide your body with quickly accessible energy supplies. The signs of hypothermia include shivering, mental confusion, sluggishness or drowsiness, cold skin, and slowed breathing or heart rate. Should these signs occur, shelter the victim from the cold and wind, covering the head and neck areas and providing insulation from the cold ground. If the victim is alert and can easily swallow, give him or her warm, sweetened fluids.

## **Altitude**

For people who live in Albuquerque, altitude sickness should not be a problem when hiking in the Sandia Mountains. However, visitors from places with lower elevations would be advised to wait a few days before hiking in the Sandias to partially acclimate to the altitude. Albuquerque and the base of the mountains are over 5,000 feet in elevation. Visitors should wait at least two days at the intermediate elevations of Albuquerque before attempting a hike that ventures to 9,000 feet elevation or higher.

## **If You Get Lost**

It is unlikely that you will get really lost in the Sandia Mountains. However, it is easy to wander off some of the lesser-used trails. As you are hiking it is always a good idea to make sure you stay on the main trail. There are numerous "volunteer paths" and game trails crisscrossing the trails described here, and it is easy to walk off the trail and end up at an obvious dead end. If this should happen, try to retrace your steps until you are sure that you have gotten back to the original trail that you intended.

Cell phones can be very helpful in an emergency. The forest service, state police, and sheriff's office recommend that you call 911 and be prepared to give the following information: your name, what is wrong (injury, lost, physical condition, etc.), your approximate location (all trails on the west side of the mountain are NOT the La Luz Trail; you should know the name of the trail that you are hiking), and your cell phone number. If you have a GPS, take a reading and give the coordinates to the 911

operator. This will help the search and rescue team find you faster. Importantly, save your cell phone batteries so that search and rescue can call you.

Search and rescue is coordinated statewide by the New Mexico State Police. Most rescue team participants are highly trained and well-equipped volunteers, so it could take some time for them to get organized and start the rescue effort. Be patient: help is coming.

If you come across someone who needs assistance, help him or her. It is best not to leave an injured person alone but rather to send someone to get help.

If you are lost, stay in one place; you will be easier to find if you are not wandering around. Although you may be able to see Albuquerque from the west side of the mountain, don't try to walk down a canyon; some of the canyons in the Sandias are impassible.

Always let someone know where you are going to hike and when you expect to return so that authorities can be notified if you have a problem and don't return home. If you can't do that, leave a note on your car dashboard that will give information (such as a cell phone number) to the team that may need to search for you.