

FIELD GUIDE TO CAMPING DANGERS

One of the things that keeps potential campers in the great indoors is all the unknowns...out there. From unforgiving weather to creepy-crawlies to vines with a vengeance, danger can seem to lurk around every tree trunk in Texas. And while nature is naturally unavoidable, being armed with knowledge—and a first-aid kit—will alleviate some fears. Kimberly Sorensen, a Houston-based outdoor education specialist with the Texas Parks & Wildlife Department, shares her knowledge of some common dangers in state parks.



Severe Weather

What to Know: Unless it's an extreme weather event like a flash flood, campers are responsible for their own safety. In the event of extreme weather, rangers will alert campers when possible.

What to Do: Use the WeatherBug app to track lightning distance. When lightning is within 10 miles, seek shelter in an enclosed area. Wind above 25 mph can damage tents—bring extra supports for the tent or plan to sleep in your car. Sorensen also notes that you're safer staying in a park than driving on the roads during severe weather.



Poison Ivy and Poison Oak

What to Know: The classic way to distinguish poisonous plants that may cause itching or an allergic reaction is to avoid "leaves of three" and to be wary of fuzzy vines around trees, especially if you're camping with kids who love to climb.

What to Do: Over-the-counter medications like Zanafel can help with irritation, and it's always a good idea to wash affected skin as quickly as you can. It also helps to wear long sleeves and pants when out and about.



Black Widow and Brown Recluse Spiders

What to Know: Black widows and brown recluses both have poisonous venom. Brown recluses in particular are known for hanging out in damp, dark areas.

What to Do: If you get bitten, it's important to seek medical attention as soon as possible. If you get bitten by any type of spider, clean the bite with water and soap. If it feels like it's getting hot or infected, seek medical help.



Venomous Snakes

What to Know: If you come across a snake, leave it alone and move slowly. Snakes will eventually move along and go about their business. When you scare them, it activates their defense mechanisms.

What to Do: Follow Sorensen's "rule of thumb" when encountering all wildlife: if you hold your thumb out at arm's length and your thumb visually covers that wildlife, you're at a respectful distance.



Ants

What to Know: Watch out for mounds where you step and carefully inspect your campsite before setting up your tent, especially in the dark. Ask your park ranger if there are invasive ant species in the park so you can avoid spreading them further.

What to Do: If you get bitten, use an antihistamine like Benadryl to help with the itching, or bring an EpiPen if you know you're allergic.



Mosquitoes and Ticks

What to Know: Ticks and mosquitoes can be found all over the state and are known to spread disease. Ticks tend to stay in more heavily wooded areas.

What to Do: To guard from bites, wear long sleeves and pants made with thicker material and apply bug spray on your clothes, especially around the bottom of your pants. Ask a local ranger if ticks are prevalent in the area, keep out of tall grass, and stay on trails.