

UNEXPECTED OVERNIGHT WILDERNESS SAFETY CHECKLIST

Decide safely. Manage exposure. Prepare for daylight or rescue.

Use this checklist when your planned outdoor return is no longer safe.
Call emergency services when injuries, exposure, or conditions require rescue.

01 STOP AND ASSESS

- ☐ Stop before darkness, fatigue, or uncertainty creates additional risk.
- ☐ Identify your location using GPS, offline maps, signs, or known landmarks.
- ☐ Check usable daylight, weather, terrain, and immediate environmental hazards.
- ☐ Assess yourself and companions for injuries, exhaustion, or illness.
- ☐ Compare the risks of continuing, remaining nearby, or relocating to safety.

02 COMMUNICATE YOUR PLAN

- ☐ Contact your trip-plan person; explain your location, condition, and delay.
- ☐ Share accurate coordinates, trail names, and nearby landmarks when possible.
- ☐ Call 911 or activate an emergency beacon if rescue is necessary.
- ☐ Follow responder instructions and keep your communication device accessible.

03 CHOOSE A SAFER OVERNIGHT LOCATION

- ☐ Choose stable ground with drainage and protection from wind when possible.
- ☐ Avoid flood channels, dead trees, rockfall, unstable slopes, and exposed ridges.
- ☐ If current conditions pose immediate danger, move carefully to safer terrain.

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04 PROTECT AGAINST EXPOSURE

- ☐ Set up available tent, tarp, emergency bivy, or other appropriate protection.
- ☐ Insulate yourself from cold or wet ground; keep clothing and bedding dry.
- ☐ Add warm layers and rain protection; limit unnecessary sweating and exertion.
- ☐ Watch for confusion, poor coordination, or other signs of hypothermia.
- ☐ Never treat a tent, tarp, or bivy as lightning-safe shelter.

05 MANAGE SUPPLIES AND SIGNAL SAFELY

- ☐ Conserve phone and headlamp power without missing important rescue contact.
- ☐ Keep drinking water available; treat collected water appropriately.
- ☐ Organize food, first aid, spare clothing, lighting, and navigation tools.
- ☐ Use a whistle, light, or bright material to signal without taking new risks.
- ☐ Avoid unsafe fires, dangerous climbs, or unnecessary travel to attract attention.

06 REASSESS AT DAYLIGHT

- ☐ Check physical condition, current weather, visibility, and remaining supplies.
- ☐ Confirm your route and decide whether returning is genuinely safe.
- ☐ If rescue is underway, coordinate before moving whenever possible.
- ☐ Update your trip contact or responders with your next steps.

PREVENTION REMINDER

Set a turnaround time, share a trip plan, and carry overnight essentials.