

GOING SOLO, STAYING SAFE

I have done almost 2000 miles of solo backpacking - in all those miles, nothing seriously scary or awful has happened. A few things have occurred that have led me to make changes in my gear or my practices, but nothing catastrophic.

I think the three main dangers that may affect solo hikers are injury, encounters with scary humans, and very rarely (where I backpack) negative encounters with wild animals. This assumes you stay on marked trails and have good navigation aids, which makes it very difficult to get lost. In my experience, the largest source of fear when I'm out solo in the wilds is - my own mind.

There are a few general safety rules I follow when I am solo hiking.

- I almost never choose the area or route that will have the fewest people. I'd like to see at least a few other humans every day. I save the super remote wilderness areas for trips where I am hiking with others.
- I always file a trip itinerary with a check in person, more on that below.
- I almost never go "off trail". On rare occasions, I may take an overland short cut...for example, a one mile off trail detour that might save 5 miles of trail walking. It's better if I have done the short cut before and know the terrain. I will specify it in my itinerary with my check in person and use extra caution. You can certainly hurt yourself hiking on a trail, but the chance of injury is significantly higher when you are travelling off maintained trails.
- I almost always sleep more than 5 miles from the closest car access. In my experience, most creepy guys aren't willing to walk very far. Especially drunk ones. Distance from parking lot equals way fewer creeps.
- I never tell people I meet on trail that I am hiking alone. I have a stock answer, that my husband is meeting me at a campsite a little way down the trail.

For Injuries and emergencies

- I carry a Garmin In-Reach Mini satellite messenger. It's tiny, weighs only 3.5 oz, and has a rechargeable battery. You must have a subscription to use it. They have different subscription plans, the cheapest of which is \$7.99 a month and gets you access to SOS services and pay as you go messaging.
- I would use the Garmin to send a message to my check in person if I needed basic help – like an ankle sprain where I could still make my way to the nearest trailhead and arrange for someone to meet me. I would also use the Garmin to send a message if I had an injury that was not severe, but bad enough that I needed someone to hike in, meet me, and help me to the nearest trailhead. If I had a severe injury, I would use the SOS button on the Garmin and let them help me figure out what kind of rescue I needed.
- I carry a very basic first aid kit, because on most of my solo trips, I am never too far away from trailhead access to get help.
- Here is a list of what's in my kit: see the article on this website called [Lighten Up Ladies for a more detailed explanation of items.](#)

Pills – 5 days of Macrobid, 4 Azo for UTI pain relief, 12 Ibuprofen, 2 Mucinex, 4 Sudafed, 2 Benadryl, 2 Imodium. Put them in a small plastic pill bottle, labeled with descriptions of the pills so you know what they are.

First Aid – Neosporin (2 small travel packets), 4 Alcohol wipes, 2 blister bandages, assorted strips of Leukotape, 4 small gauze squares, 1 large sterile gauze pad, about 3 feet of stretchy bandage tape, 2-3 feet of 3" ace bandage A small swiss army knife with scissors if I am not carrying a bigger knife

- I did, years ago, take a Mountain Oriented First Aid class, as well as a standard Red Cross first aid class. When I started solo hiking, I did a basic refresher course online.
- If you're going into an ecosystem different than the one you're normally in, find out about specific dangers in that area – venomous snakes etc.
- Plan your solo hikes carefully - especially if you're accident prone. Pick routes with a lot of side trails that lead to parking lots where you can more easily get help.
- Use a lot of common sense and prevention. I call on the spirit of my Nana, who was a very practical woman, to walk with me. I ask her to help remind me to make every step a good one. Mindful, careful steps.
- Find your flow - we all have an optimal speed and a sense of being in our bodies, in flow, graceful. If you feel "off" sometimes, awkward in your body, can't get the rhythm - respect that. Stop or slow way down. Do some kind of embodiment ritual. Ask the spirits of that land for help - let them know you come in a good way, offering respect and

appreciation - ask them to look out for you as you walk. Don't hike when you are really weary - that's when many accidents happen. Plan your days well. Stay within your limits. Ask for spirit guidance. Do your best to limit risk, then let it go and enjoy yourself.

Having a check in person:

I always designate a check in person when I am hiking solo. I arrange to send them a message every day on my Garmin satellite messenger. I give them a copy of my trip plan. I let them know during the trip if the itinerary changes, by sending them a Garmin message. That way, the search area is relatively small if I go missing. They know I will be on trail X between Y and Z points. I have a standard format form I give to my check in person and I make sure they understand what to do in the event I don't check in as we have arranged.

Here is an example of what I give my check in person:

Thanks for being my check in person.

I will be hiking the West Fork Dosewallips Trail to the O'Neill Pass Trail.

I will be taking a short cut from the O'Neill Pass Trail to Lake LaCrosse called Rangers Pass on 9/5.

I will be day hiking around La Crosse basin on the 6th and 7th.

I will take the Duckabush River Trail to the Home Sweet Home trail 9/8

I will hike out on 9/10 on the North Fork Skokomish Trail.

Here is my itinerary and permit number:

Reservation/permit number: **0626849106-1**

Sep 3, 2024	Sep 4, 2024	Big Timber
Sep 4, 2024	Sep 5, 2024	Anderson Glacier Camp (No Campfires)
Sep 5, 2024	Sep 8, 2024	Lake LaCrosse (No Campfires)
Sep 8, 2024	Sep 9, 2024	Upper Duckabush
Sep 9, 2024	Sep 10, 2024	Camp Pleasant

I will be parking at the Staircase trailhead.

My car is a white Tesla Model S, WA lic BTP8117

I will send you messages through my Garmin satellite communicator. The message will not show up being from my phone number.

I will message you when I get to camp every day. I will aim for 2-3 pm, but it may be later.

If you don't hear from me on any given day:

Call the Wilderness Information Center in Port Angeles **at 9am the next morning.**

Their number is (360) 565-3100, press 4 to talk to a ranger. If you get their VM, leave a voice mail AND send them an email to OLYM_WIC@nps.gov

On both VM and email, let them know you are reporting a missing hiker who did not check in as promised. If they don't get back to you quickly, call 911 to report a missing hiker in Olympic National Park, they will call the WIC on their super-secret hotline number and get you right through.

Let them know my itinerary and the information above, and that I have a Garmin InReach - they can check to see if I have sent an SOS on the Garmin. They will make the decisions on how to handle the missing hiker (me).

There are reasons I may not be able to send a message. I need clear sky (no tree cover) to send. It's also possible the Garmin stops working. I would try to find another hiker who had a Garmin to send a message, or find someone who is walking out that day and would send a text to your number letting you know I'm OK.

On the last day of my trip, which is _____, I will text you from normal cell phone when I get back into cell service

For Animals and Creepy Humans, Bear Spray

I did not carry bear spray until last year. I don't solo hike in grizzly country. I tend to be in the Olympics or the Cascades in Washington state, whose black bears don't tend to be an issue, if you follow the common sense rules.

However, last year I had my first run in with a "creepy guy". I believe I read the encounter well and reacted properly for the situation. I was about 3 miles from the parking lot, starting out on a 5 day solo trip. I passed a man sitting on the side of the trail, not wearing a pack. He got up and began walking next to me. I told him I was not up for company. He began telling me he really needed human touch, he was so lonely. He tried to touch my shoulders. I stopped and faced him, used a low but loud voice and told him

something along the lines of "Absolutely do not touch me! Get the fuck away from me right now". That took him off guard for a moment, he kind of backed away. We were just approaching a lake with a number of camp sites, and I think I said something about going to find a place to camp. I walked down a social trail until I couldn't see him anymore, then high tailed it back to my car. I was too freaked out to continue my trip in that area, so I drove to the nearest town, bought some bear spray, and went to the wilderness coast, where there are hordes of people. I needed to go somewhere I felt safe and get back in my groove. When I got home, I watched some videos about properly using bear spray, going through scenarios in my head about how I would use it on Creepy Guy. I'm pretty sure I will never need it against a black bear - so I call it people spray. I take it with me on most, but not all, solo trips.

The one time I have ever pulled it out of its holster was late season last year. I was solo hiking on the Elwha River, coming out after 5 days. It was early morning, I was walking fast, I came flying around a sharp turn in the trail and there was an adult cougar napping in the trail. Luckily, I did not step on her but pulled back and let out a cry of surprise - which woke her up. She jumped back...I think we scared the crap out of each other. We stood and stared at each other for a couple deep breaths, each doing our own threat assessment. (which, as a side note, was perhaps the coolest 20 seconds of my life). Somehow, the bear spray found its way out of the holster and the safety was off, though I can't consciously remember doing it. I had my other hand up in the air to make myself look human and big, and was talking low and calm to her, telling her I was a human, not prey, and no threat to her. We both began to back away slowly, then she turned and jogged down trail about 20 feet - looked back at me for a long moment, and took off up the hill, leaving the trail. The bear spray was not discharged, as it wasn't needed, but it made me feel good that my practice runs pulling it out and taking the safety off had worked - I did it in the blink of an eye, automatically and smoothly. If you choose to hike with bear spray, carry it where it's accessible all the time, practice accessing it until it's seamless.

Notes on Bear and Animal Safety

There are excellent resources out there that are more comprehensive and expert than I can offer. But I will offer some basic advice.

I watch bear and cougar and elk safety videos at the beginning of each backpacking season. I review what to do during encounters with wildlife, what is “normal” and what is “aggressive”, what to do in either case.

I make noise when I am hiking alone. (though I must have been quiet as a mouse when I surprised the cougar...or she was an extremely heavy sleeper)

For the most part, wild animals don’t want to be in close contact with you. If you follow the commonsense rules and be mindful that you are in their living room, you will almost never have a problem.

When I am backpacking solo, I am meticulous and impeccable in my habits. I never get lazy or cut corners. Learn the rules for wildlife safety and follow them...all the time.

Don’t cook in your camp - in high bear areas, cook 100 yards away and downwind from your sleep space. Don’t put food in your tent - if you carry smelly personal products, store them with your food. Store the food away from your tent, but close enough to hear if a bear is trying to get into the food. You should be prepared to scare away a bear that is trying to get your food – throwing rocks, making noise, yelling etc.

Food storage

If you are going to store your food using PCT style bear hangs, please learn how to do them properly. I see some really poor bear hangs out there. You can always use a hard sided bear canister, but they are really heavy and bulky. Or you can use a bear resistant soft sided bag, like the ones from Ursak. The Ursak All Mitey is critter proof and (almost always) bear proof. It only weighs 13 oz. and I can fit 6-7 days of food in it. They still need to be hung properly and tied closed properly. The older style Ursaks (the non-puncture proof ones) have been broken open by bears shredding them. In the very few documented cases where a bear was able to break into the Ursak All-Mitey, the hikers heard the bear working on it for hours and were too scared to exit their tent and scare the bear away.

When I am solo, and the trip is over 3 days, sometimes I break the rules and use my All-Mitey because of the weight and bulk savings – even in areas where hard sided canisters are required. And sometimes, I bite the bullet and carry the hard sided bear canister.

When I am solo in bear-full areas, I use odor proof bags inside the bear bag. It will never be perfect, bears have an amazing sense of smell, but every little bit helps. I wash the bags well before use and put 2 OP sacks in a bear bag. I divide the food, by day, between them. When one is empty, I

eat from the second one. I wash my hands before I touch the odor sack, trying to keep it as clean and odor free as possible.

Dealing with Self-Created Fear

A lot of people have the same reaction when we talk about solo backpacking. That it sounds scary, they would never be able to get to sleep, etc. The summer of 2021, when I set off on a 550mile (mostly) solo backpack, I didn't really know what to expect. I did have to do some facing of my own fear. I have developed a couple strategies for dealing with fear. It doesn't happen very often anymore, but every once in a while....

- Learn to recognize 'real" fear vs "mind" fear. I've learned to listen to and trust my body. Is my mind racing, do I feel jumpy and skittish? That is probably self-created mind fear. Do I feel chill - deep quiet - hairs slowly raising on the back of my neck? That is more likely to be real fear or my intuition giving me a warning. I listen to that.
- Have some self-soothing techniques on hand for the mind fear. Have a funny book on your reading device, maybe even an episode of some feel-good TV show or podcast. Have a power spell you can draw on your tent walls. Ask for help from trusted guides or ancestors. Send your best friend a message on the Garmin and tell them about your mind freaking out. Ask them to reply with a helpful, upbeat message.
- Be stern with yourself when you need to be. If you are spiraling into fear at every little sound outside your tent, but you shine your light out and nothing is there - try giving yourself a good talking to. Make yourself walk outside your tent and face the non-existent fear. Talk out loud about what you are feeling and how it's not going to cheat you out of this experience. It should go away.
- Have headphones and half a mild OTC sleeping pill when all else fails and just sleep through it. You will feel better in the morning.

I find I go into different levels of drop in, which are dependent on time spent alone in the wilderness. It takes me about 3 days to hit the first level. About 10 days for the second. I hit another one at about 3 weeks, and that one takes a little extra care. About 3 weeks in, if I'm not seeing a lot of people or having any conversations, I notice I start to get a little wacky. It may all seem to be too much, I may feel overwhelmed, scared I might lose my shit. I just breathe, go with it, listen to some music... it will pass. All that shit usually means there is some big spiritual breakthrough, or ego death, or

soul revelation right around the corner. Woo hoo!! It is amazing what you hear when you shut up - and I mean get really quiet - for long enough.

Spirit Practices:

My spiritual practice is vital when I'm solo in the back country. Being in deep wilderness is already a religious experience. For those of us in this culture, this modernity - being alone and quiet and with no distractions is rare, sometimes scary, and can be spirit inducing. In this website, under Personal Practices, there's an article called On Trail Practices. Try some of those out!