



Winter woods safety

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By Allyson Brownlee Muth

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Winter is a lovely time to be out in the woods. The beauty and peacefulness of a snow-blanketed woods is rejuvenating; the brisk days, the quiet evidence of wildlife in the snow and ice. But care should be taken in winter, and throughout the year, to remain safe in the woods.

With extreme weather like straight-line winds and tornadoes occurring throughout the year, trees can sustain damage such as broken limbs or tops. Add in the weight of ice and snow and one must be cautious when enjoying a peaceful ramble. Look up often to ensure you're not walking or stopping under dangling limbs that could give way in the wind or to gravity. They're called widow-makers for a reason. If they're in areas where others might encounter them, flag the area to remind yourself to use caution or avoid the area until they fall.

In the forest, trees die all the time. After their death, most trees degrade from small pieces to large — small twigs and branches are the first to break off, followed by larger structural limbs and eventually the trunk — over the course of several years. Forest health issues can also raise concern about structural changes in a tree.

Insects and diseases that attack individual

trees can cause limbs to die back or trees to die outright. Hemlock woolly adelgid attacks hemlocks. Years with severe gypsy moth outbreaks kill oaks. In times of high insect activity, we can sometimes see widespread mortality. Most of the trees killed will degrade slowly, but ash doesn't always follow the normal patterns for breakdown post-death. Take extra caution in areas with ash die-off, especially on windy days since ash have been known to snap off midway up the bole, or trunk, of the tree.

Woods safety also includes the clothes you wear and personal protective equipment. Always wear sturdy shoes that support ankles on uneven ground. If you know you'll encounter wet soils or you're out and about after rain, waterproof boots or shoes are useful. A hard hat is also an important bit of woods safety equipment. Many foresters wear theirs every day, but especially on those windy days it's a good example to follow. Wear clothes that can tolerate pushing through brush, vines or brambles. Consider warm clothes and layers for cold days, clothes that cool and protect from the sun for warm days. Don't forget eye protection if you're clearing brush or cutting.

Unfortunately, ticks are active year-round, though less so on those extremely cold, dry days, which can knock back their populations with many consecutive days of that weather.

Be tick savvy year-round. Clothing is an important protective layer to guard against ticks. Tuck your long pants into your socks or tape them to your boots. Also tuck your long-sleeved shirts into your pants. The goal is to not allow for openings for the ticks to get to your skin, and to give you a greater chance of discovering and removing them as they climb up. Doing so will also help protect you from irritant plants like poison ivy or stinging nettles when they are out.

Always, always do tick checks during and after your trips into the woods. The Aspirus Tick-Borne Illness Center in Woodruff recommends wearing light-colored clothing so you can spot the ticks, and since they always climb up, tucking your pants into your socks to keep them from moving from your clothing to your skin.

If you find an embedded tick, one you cannot flick off your skin easily, the only way you should remove it is by grasping it close to the skin with a fine-tipped tweezers or a tick removal tool. Place it in a sealed plastic bag with a piece of wet cotton or paper towel and then stick it in the freezer and label the bag with the date and location of the bite. If you

later feel ill, you can get the tick tested for the various tick-borne diseases, which will greatly aid in diagnosis and treatment.

Many folks who spend their days active in the woods have found benefit in wearing permethrin-treated clothes to repel the ticks outright, in addition to tucking in pants and shirts. Others wear long underwear year-round or insect shield body suits that add another layer of protection. Personally, I have a pair of woods overalls that I've treated with permethrin that I pull on over whatever I'm wearing. It's an extra layer of protection for plowing through brambles, as well as a tick repellent.

If you suspect you have a tick-borne disease, a good place to start is the Aspirus center where victims stand the best chance of being properly diagnosed and treated in the Midwest. That's because the center was established there because northern Wisconsin and eastern Minnesota have more cases of Lyme disease reported than anywhere else in the country, with the exception of the New England states.

Chainsaw safety is an in-depth safety topic and warrants its own article.

Suffice it to say, get training from experts, use great caution when operating saws and felling trees, utilize personal protective equipment and know your limits. If you've never taken a chainsaw safety course, find one that teaches you safe strategies: assessing escape routes, directional felling utilizing cuts and wedges, saw maintenance and safe usage, personal protective equipment and more.

As always, make sure you have water for hydration and snacks to keep your energy up. Hiking through the woods can be a workout. Always carry a charged cell phone or a two-way radio. Tell someone where you're going and when you expect to be back. Don't let yourself get too tired; pay attention to your body and stop if you start to realize you're fatigued.

Being safe in the woods is about common sense and preparedness. Keep yourself safe so you can continue to enjoy the woods year-round.



Allyson Brownlee Muth is the interim director of the Center for Private Forests at PennState.



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