



Risky business

As our desire to return to nature increases and more of us are out enjoying Western Australia's parks and reserves, the number of injuries and, sadly, fatalities is also on the rise. It is more important than ever to break our reliance on technology, know our limits and understand the risks well ahead of taking a step into the outdoors.

by Michael Phillips



The number of visitors to national parks and reserves is on the increase, as locals and visitors make their way outdoors to counterbalance the increasing density of our urban lives.

The average size of the Australian backyard is decreasing and so is our common knowledge about the risks that are present in the outdoors.

Fewer of us know through experience about how to deal with outdoor risks such as snake bites, extreme weather conditions and getting lost in the bush.

As a result, when something goes wrong, we are less inclined to think it is something we should have known and more likely to say it is something we should have been told.

Sadly, the increase in fatalities in national parks in recent years is a stark reminder that we need to be prepared before heading into the outdoors.

INTO THE UNKNOWN

It's fair to say that every trip into nature comes with a level of risk. Some risks are well known, such as dehydration, rough terrain and sunburn. Other risks are less obvious such as strong currents, the effects of extreme heat and the remoteness of some locations.

For those who are not accustomed to being in the outdoors or international visitors unfamiliar with the Australian heat and conditions it is absolutely essential to plan ahead and prepare for your trip as much as possible before you leave home.

"You may think that interstate or international tourists have the most difficulty in WA parks," Michael Phillips,



visitor risk management coordinator from the Department of Biodiversity, Conservation and Attractions (DBCA) said.

"But in fact almost 75 per cent of the incidents involve Western Australians exploring their backyard.

"The common Aussie attitude of 'oh it won't happen to me' doesn't really stack up, as anything can happen to anyone if you are not prepared properly."

GO ANALOGUE

Our increasing reliance on technology can pose a safety risk if we are unable to get by without it. While many popular parks and attractions are becoming Wi-Fi enabled for safety reasons, some picturesque locations are as remote and dangerous as they come.

Concerningly, how we learn and what information we retain has been impacted by the fact that the answer to any question is always instantly available in the palm of our hand. Digital technologies can help us acquire the information, but it is up to us to retain it, in the event those technologies are not available. Planning and researching are the first and most important steps when considering spending time in nature, and we need to truly understand those risks before we step out into the outdoors.

Safety information is available in almost every possible format, both analogue and digital.

"Interpretive signage is present in parks at key locations and not only provides interesting information about the area and its cultural history, but also

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Main Visitors sitting dangerously at the cliff edge of Yardie Creek, Cape Range National Park.

Photo – Jennifer Eliot/DBCA

Inset Warning sign at Yardie Creek.

Photo – DBCA

Above Natural Bridge in Torndirrup National Park can be a dangerous part of the coastline near Albany.

Photo – Mike Shephard

key safety messaging," Michael said.

"Emerging technologies such as personal locator beacons are becoming more budget friendly and can certainly be useful if things do go wrong."

POPULARITY CRISIS

Some parks in Western Australia are suffering from a crisis of popularity. Popular natural icons such as Nature's Window in Kalbarri National Park, The Gap and Natural Bridge in Torndirrup National Park and the falls in Serpentine National Park can have queues of people waiting during peak season, at times putting themselves and others in danger to get that perfect selfie.

Multi-day trips require more detailed planning but even an afternoon visit to a local park with friends and some smiling posts on social media could result in serious consequences if the risks aren't properly known and warnings aren't adhered to.

Some popular tourist sites around the world have been closed permanently or have limited access in an effort to reduce the number of injuries and deaths.

View park safety videos

Scan this QR code or visit Parks and Wildlife Service's 'LANDSCOPE' playlist on YouTube.



NOT WHAT YOU KNOW

Heat stroke, slips and trips, falls from rock ledges, wandering off designated trails and drowning are the most common causes of death and injury in national and marine parks.

Even in seemingly harmless swimming areas such as Lane Poole Reserve in WA's south-west, temperatures in the air above the popular Island Pool section of the Murray River can be in the mid-thirties, but if you swim under the water far enough, it can reach below four degrees.

Top Serpentine National Park.

Photo – Tourism WA

Above Personal locator beacon.

Photo – Rebecca Roth/NASA

Above right Bungle Bungle Range, Purnululu National Park.

Photo – Tourism WA

Right Stirling Range National Park.

Photo – Ann Storrie

The shock to the system can be enough to risk drowning.

Rangers are often told by people involved in swimming incidents that they are good swimmers, however swimming in natural water bodies is very different from swimming in a pool.

“People also commonly bring a small bottle of water with them on a walk

thinking it will be enough and end up suffering from exhaustion, dehydration and heat stroke,” Michael said.

The reality is, while your safety is the concern of park rangers and emergency services, it is your responsibility to make sure you're prepared before you even take a single step into the great outdoors.





Before you go:

- Know the park, its conditions, hazardous landscape features, insects and wildlife
- Check what facilities are available
- Check forecasts and use weather and sun protection
- Check for bushfire warnings and other information such as park closures
- Notify people you trust
- Know your limits
- Ensure your equipment is appropriate
- Carry enough drinking water
- Carry a first aid kit

Find up-to-date information on park and trail closures at alerts.dbca.wa.gov.au



It's important to do some research before heading to any park, but we've put together a list of parks where you may encounter some more serious risks.

Staying safe north of Perth

1 Nyinggulu (Ningaloo) Coastal Reserves

Main risks: Swimming, rips, unpatrolled beaches, boating risks

 **Ranger's tips** The Ningaloo Coast World Heritage Area is in the hot and arid tropics of north-west Australia. Summer temperatures often exceed 45 degrees Celsius. Visitors planning to drive to the Ningaloo Coast should be cautious when travelling after sunset, as the large number of kangaroos and other animals make driving hazardous. There is no drinking water available in Cape Range National Park or Nyinggulu Coastal Reserves. When boating, swimming or snorkelling, keep in mind that ocean conditions can become hazardous quickly, especially near gaps in the reef. If in doubt, don't go out. Tropical cyclones are occasionally experienced between November and April and summer visitors are advised to listen for cyclone warnings.

2 Karijini National Park

Main risks: Extreme heat, cliffs and gorges

 **Ranger's tips** Karijini's impressive gorges have very high vertical cliffs, and cliff edges can be loose and unstable. Flash floods can occur in the gorges. Do not enter the gorges during or after heavy rain. During summer, temperatures frequently exceed 40 degrees Celsius so carry plenty of water at all times when undertaking walks and other activities. Wear sturdy walking shoes, use good sun protection, and take plenty of water. Stay on established trails and stand well back from cliff edges. Water temperatures may be very low in deep gorges during the cooler months of the year.

3 Mount Augustus National Park

Main risks: Dehydration, heat stress, heat stroke, isolation

 **Ranger's tips** A personal locator beacon (PLB) is essential. Wear sturdy footwear and protective clothing. There is no drinking water in the park. Do not expect to find water in natural watercourses, even in winter, so always carry enough for your own needs. Heat stroke can kill and summer temperatures are extremely high. Carry and drink three to four litres per person per day. Be aware that if a natural water source is available, it will need treatment to make it safe to drink. Treatment can be boiling for at least one minute, mechanical filtration or chemical treatment.

4 Kalbarri National Park

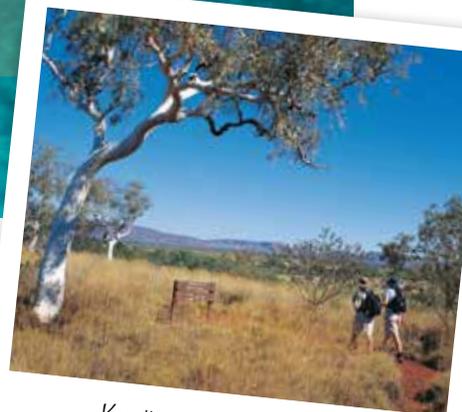
Main risks: Cliffs and gorges, extreme heat when walking the gorges during hotter months

 **Ranger's tips** Summer heat can be extreme, particularly on the Loop Trail. Do not hike in hot weather. Carry and drink three to four litres of water per person, per day when walking. Wear a hat and loose, long-sleeved clothing. Walk in the cooler times of day. Hike the longer walks in the cooler months (April to

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Above Turquoise Bay, Cape Range National Park.

Above right Hikers heading to Joffre Falls, Karijini National Park.
Photos – Tourism WA

Below Emergency satellite phones are in place at Kalbarri National Park.
Photo – DBCA



Karijini National Park

October). Hike the Loop Trail before 7am (November to March). Drinking water is not available in the park so always carry your own supply. Keep well clear of the water's edge near coastal cliffs. Massive wave surges have claimed lives. The edges of the cliffs and gorges are unstable and undercut. Stay clear of cliff edges and overhangs.

5 Nambung National Park

Main risks: Extreme heat

 **Ranger's tips** Summer days between December and March are usually hot and dry. During this time the fire danger may be extreme.





Stirling Range National Park



Staying safe south of Perth

6 Penguin Island

Main risks: Crossing the sandbar is dangerous due to weather and ocean conditions

 **Ranger's tips** Weather conditions can change quickly, making crossing the sand bar very dangerous. The Parks and Wildlife Service strongly recommends against walking the sand bar to reach the island. When you're visiting the island, remain on the boardwalks, walk trails and sandy beaches, and stay clear of limestone cliffs, caves and overhangs as they may be unstable and prone to collapse.

7 Leeuwin-Naturaliste National Park

Main risks: Rock fishing, slippery rocks, strong currents, unpatrolled beaches

 **Ranger's tips** Consider travelling with a PLB. In the event you need to be rescued, it could save your life. Exercise extreme caution near cliff edges especially when fishing. Supervise children at all times. Always be aware of your surroundings and pay attention to visitor risk warning signs. They are there to alert you for your protection and safety.

8 Stirling Range National Park

Main risks: Extreme and changing weather risks, veering off trails, heat risk

 **Ranger's tips** Bushwalking is not recommended in hot and windy conditions due to the risk of bushfire. Carry and drink plenty of water – three to four litres per person per day. Wear sun protection, boots or sturdy footwear, and clothing that is weatherproof and

scratchproof. Be prepared for unexpected changes in the weather. Sloping, rough and uneven surfaces exist throughout the park. Take extra care near rock edges as they can crumble without warning or be very slippery.

9 Torndirrup National Park

Main risks: Rock fishing risks at Salmon Holes, slippery rocks

 **Ranger's tips** Rock fishing is extremely dangerous on this coastline and is not recommended. It is mandatory to wear a PFD while fishing at the Salmon Holes if you are venturing onto the rocks and use of rock anchors is strongly encouraged. The Torndirrup coast has a notorious record for accidents and deaths due to people slipping or being washed into the ocean by large waves, gusting winds or extra large swells. Please exercise extreme caution and don't risk being the next victim. Always be aware of your surroundings and pay attention to visitor risk warning signs.

10 Long trails – Bibbulmun Track, Munda Biddi Trail and Cape to Cape Track

Main risks: Navigational errors

 **Ranger's tips** Plan well ahead and study the area you're going into. You don't have to go far before you can be on an isolated track, the weather changes or you encounter wildlife. It is always advisable to stay on existing tracks. If you get lost, stay where you are. You'll be found sooner if you don't stray from tracks. A PLB is essential.



Torndirrup National Park

Millions of visitors enjoy their time in national parks and reserves with visitor satisfaction consistently above 90 per cent, but things do go wrong due to people being unprepared or undertaking risky behaviours.

Top left Stirling Range National Park.
Photo – David Bettini

Top Sandbar at Penguin Island.
Photo – Peter Nicholas/DCBCA

Above A near miss for rock fishers at Salmon Holes.
Photo – DBCA

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For more information about park safety visit explore.parks.dbca.wa.gov.au/safety