



# SAFETY IN ALASKA

USEFUL LINKS:

[Cold weather](#) [Gear](#) [Bears](#) [Boating](#) [Winter Driving](#)

[Use Common Sense!](#)



Having completed several tours in Alaska, I know just how many wonderful outdoor recreational activities the state's remote and rugged wilderness has to offer. While enjoying the outdoors, it's always important to ensure you and your family take the proper safety precautions before leaving home, and are prepared for the unexpected.

The key to staying safe in Alaska is preparation. I encourage you to use the following guidelines when planning your outdoor activities.

First, make sure you always have the necessary equipment for your activity. Even if you plan for a short day trip, pack for the worst. Alaska's unpredictable weather patterns can leave you stranded without warning. Make sure you can call someone for assistance.

Second, always use the buddy system. There are countless tragic mishaps that may have been avoided if the buddy system had been properly used. In Alaska's extreme environment, traveling alone adds an unnecessary risk.

Third, always let someone know where you and your party are headed. If nobody knows you are missing, a search and rescue effort can be delayed: a possible life and death difference. Leave a trip plan behind that includes where you are going and when you are expected to return.

One of our goals as an organization is the promotion of safe boating practices among the general population. The best step we can take in teaching the public is following our own advice and staying safe while off duty.

Much like our core values, the safety we practice at work should carry over into our downtime. When you take off your uniform, you are still a representative of the Coast Guard. With the right mindset we can spare ourselves from experiencing the tragic loss of our shipmates, which has happened too often in the past.

The following true stories are not intended to deter you from enjoying the outdoors, but to make you aware of the very real dangers the Alaska wilderness presents. Please take time to read these examples and take advantage of the links on the title page.

Educate yourself and educate your colleagues. And remember, there are no bystanders in the Coast Guard.

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "T. P. Ostebo".

T. P. Ostebo  
Rear Admiral, U.S. Coast Guard  
Commander, 17th Coast Guard District



# LEARN FROM OTHERS

## WILDLIFE

**July 2001** –A Coast Guard officer sustained significant injuries while biking in Anchorage. He was biking on a well-known coastal trail when he came around a corner and encountered a moose and her calf in the middle of the path. He swerved to avoid the moose and quickly hit his brakes. In doing so, he was thrown over the handlebars of his bike and landed on his head and arms. His bike helmet probably saved his life, but it didn't save him from breaking both his arms. He was extremely lucky that the moose did not charge him.



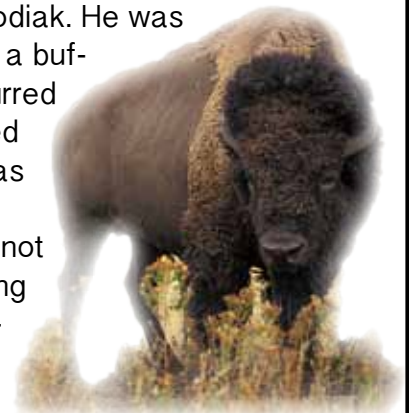
-Know what kind of wildlife you may encounter in your recreation area



**November 1998** – A petty officer from Air Station Kodiak was mauled by a Kodiak bear near Terror Bay, on the northwest side of Kodiak Island. The petty officer encountered the sow and her four cubs while on a hunting trip. The petty officer was attacked suffering multiple lacerations and a severe eye injury. A nearby fishing vessel heard his distress call over a radio and relayed the information to the Coast Guard, who was able to rescue him. Bears are common in Alaska and are most times unpredictable.

- Assume you will encounter bears in Alaska  
- Know what to do when you encounter a bear (see the links on the cover page)

**September 2006** – A member collided with a bison while driving in Kodiak. He was recalled back to duty and while driving back to the station, collided with a buffalo that was lying down in a blind spot on the roadway. The recall occurred in the late evening. While operating the vehicle, the member encountered a sharp turn in the road that created the blind spot where the animal was lying down. Member attempted to stop, but due to the close proximity of the animal, the collision was unavoidable. Fortunately, the member was not seriously injured. However, the animal was killed. The member was driving below the speed limit when the accident occurred. It is common for animals to cross or rest on roadways in Alaska.



-Be especially alert while driving at night in Alaska

# ALL TERRAIN VEHICLES

ATV accidents account for a significantly high amount of off-duty injuries in Alaska's Coast Guard community, to the extent that listing all of them would be impractical. Below is a handful of summaries describing ATV adventures gone wrong and a few tips on how to avoid potential tragedies.



**May 2000** – An Air Station Kodiak member died in an ATV accident in Chiniak on Kodiak Island. While riding his ATV alone on a trail, he attempted to turn left to avoid a cliff edge but was unable to negotiate the turn. Pfeifer drove his ATV off the cliff, fell 150 feet, and struck a boulder at the base of the cliff. He was found dead by his friends.

-Know the area where you will be operating an ATV.

**August 2007** –A Coast Guard member was thrown from an ATV while riding in Kodiak. The ATV rolled down a hill over the member and broke the member's leg in three places. The member was forced to crawl half a mile to the nearest road to flag down someone for help.

-If possible, don't ride alone.

**March 2011** – A CGC Sycamore member rolled his ATV while driving aggressively on uneven off-road terrain near Cordova, and was not wearing a helmet. The member was knocked unconscious for a brief period and was transported to emergency medical personnel for overnight observation.

-Always, always wear a helmet.

# SNOWMOBILES

Snowmobiles, the winter cousins to the ATV, are enjoyed by many Alaska residents. They offer a means of transportation as well as recreation, but are inherently dangerous due to the conditions in which they operate.

**November 2004** – A Coast Guard reservist died in a snowmobile accident that occurred in Tok. He was riding his snowmobile with friends when he struck a submerged object in the snow. As a result of the impact, he was severely injured but managed to make his way to a nearby road, where he collapsed from his injuries. Once his friends realized he wasn't following them, they turned around to search for him. He died before making it to a hospital for emergency care. Although the member was wearing the proper safety gear including a helmet, these items did not protect him from the substantial trauma to his body.

-Get to know your operating area before travelling at high speeds.



**January 2012** – A Coast Guard member was snowmobiling near Denali and suffered severe frostbite due to below-freezing temperatures and moisture from sweating. The member had to travel 30 miles to reach a safe dwelling and was then taken to a clinic for frostbite treatment.

-Ensure you have the proper personal protective equipment for any activity. Prepare for the worst.

# WATER SAFETY



**October 1992** – Two Juneau-area Coast Guard members died in a boating accident while returning from a hunting trip on an island near Juneau. They were both avid outdoorsmen. While returning from their hunting trip, they noticed that their boat was drifting away. In hope of catching the drifting boat, they launched their beached skiff into choppy seas. Waves swamped their skiff, subjecting the men to cold Alaskan water. CG Station Juneau personnel found them deceased, several hours later. No decision regarding boating activities in Alaskan waters should be taken without first weighing the consequences. In this incident, a quick decision to rush to their boat in choppy seas cost them their lives. Your boat isn't worth your life.



**June 2006** – A Coast Guard member and a passenger survived rapids during a recreation trip near Juneau. The member was operating his newly-acquired, 16-foot jet skiff in an extremely remote, shallow, white-water river in Alaska. Member was navigating downstream in a difficult part of the river when, immediately after jumping a log-jam, his engine began cavitating and would not provide propulsion. Member attempted to fix the problem, while the jet skiff drifted in the current towards several boulders and rapids. Member and passenger started paddling. The two were able to navigate the skiff through most of the rapids before being caught in an eddy, pushed up against two boulders and eventually swamping and sinking the skiff. After struggling for 30 to 45 minutes in the frigid glacier-runoff to free the skiff, the two gave up and body surfed down the remaining rapids. The two began making preparations for survival in accordance with D17 Cold Weather Survival Training and activated an EPIRB. At 0100, a CG helo from AIRSTA Sitka arrived and hoisted both parties to safety. Member was able to recover his skiff with minimal damage the next day.

# WILDERNESS



**December 2012** – A crewmember of the Coast Guard Cutter Munro went missing while hiking Mt. Barometer in Kodiak. Though an experienced climber, and equipped with climbing gear, he fell over 1,000 feet off a cliff. He was alone, and nobody knew when he was due back, so a search did not begin until 36 hours after he left. Due to extreme weather conditions, the Coast Guardsman was found, deceased, on Christmas Day. Remember to prepare yourself, use your resources and let someone know where you are going. Your life may depend on it.

-Use the buddy system, and leave your itinerary with someone.

**August 2006** – A member from the CGC Hickory was injured while descending a mountain. He was descending a mountain to meet a small boat for pick up and then return to the Cutter. He suddenly lost his footing and fell. His knee impacted a rock, causing great pain and the inability to continue. Member's companion stabilized his condition, built a small camp, and left for assistance. The Cutter dispatched a rescue team and reached the injured member at sunset. He was then strapped to a litter and transported, but the terrain became impassable in the darkness. As the Rescue Team prepared to spend the night in the woods with the member, his condition rapidly worsened, showing signs of early shock. The command center was notified, and a medevac was coordinated. Member was then transported to a nearby hospital and diagnosed with a torn MCL and ACL of the right knee. The long-term result is that the member will require reconstructive surgery and physical therapy.

-Use the buddy system, and leave your itinerary with someone.

# OTHER DANGERS

## Alcohol

**March 1995** – A CGC Storis crewmember died while at a bonfire in a clearing on the coast of Monashka Bay on Kodiak Island. According to his friends, he had been drinking quite heavily and was inebriated. His friends tried to keep an eye on him, but ran into the woods. A search was started immediately and his body was located seven hours later at the base of a 200-foot cliff near the site of the party. Excess alcohol consumption prevented him from considering the risks and making sound and reasonable decisions.



-Alaska's extreme environment and alcohol do not mix

**August 2012** – A member from Station Ketchikan fell off a balcony after consuming too much alcohol. The resulting injuries included a collapsed lung, lacerated kidney, two broken ribs and multiple bruises and contusions.

-Drink responsibly

## Firearms

**September 2011** – While on liberty in Ketchikan, a CGC Sycamore crew member discharged his personal firearm into the floor of a hotel room after he had been drinking. Although nobody was injured, the potential for a tragedy while firing a weapon in a populated area is obvious. Firearms are a prevalent part of the Alaskan culture. Practice the safe weapon-handling techniques taught by the Coast Guard while on or off duty. Also, do not mix drinking alcohol with firearms.

-Know safe weapon-handling procedures

## Snowboarding

Numerous Coast Guard members have been injured while snowboarding anywhere from Anchorage to Cordova to Juneau. Injuries have included broken clavicles, dislocated shoulders, a fractured greater tuberosity and a variety of other injuries to limbs. While a great form of exercise, snowboarding and skiing should be practiced with care.

- Ski or snowboard with others
- Obtain all the necessary safety gear
- Take lessons to learn the sport safely

