



# Tips for Teaching Outdoors: Safety Considerations

**Know your field trip location.** Prepare your students for what they can expect when they arrive at the site. Go over the safety rules with the students prior to the trip.

## Things to Know Before You Go!

- **Know your location.** The field trip site should be visited by the teacher in advance to determine if there are any safety or health hazards and how to address them. If the site is private property, make sure there is written permission for use. Check with your school district policies before you go.
- **Make an emergency plan.** Review the plan with adult chaperones and students prior to the field trip. Make sure everyone knows what to do if they become lost or a medical emergency arises.
- **Be prepared with food and water.** Ensure that students bring adequate food and water. Bring hand sanitizer to use after your exploration and before eating.
- **Clothing.** Ensure that students wear appropriate clothing. Dressing in layers will keep students warm and prepared for unexpected changes in weather. A base layer of quick-dry fabric made of polyester or nylon is better than blue jeans or cotton. Fleece and wool are insulating even when wet. Wear waterproof footwear such as gumboots and bring a change of shoes. Bring hats, sunglasses, sunscreen, and rain gear. Especially if going on a winter field trip, notify parents early so appropriate gear can be gathered in advance. What may have fit last season may be much too small when it is time for the field trip!
- **Carry a first-aid kit.** Know who has allergies to wasp or bee stings. Ensure they have their epi-pen.
- **Bring a whistle.** Have a way to call the students in from exploration and get their attention. Make sure that students know their cues in advance.
- **Practice safe and responsible use of tools.** Learn how to use equipment prior to the field trip.
- **Be prepared for natural hazards.** Please see WildSafeBC for more species specific information and safety brochures. <https://wildsafebc.com>

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*“There is no bad weather,  
only bad clothing.”*



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Here are some general considerations:

- **Wildlife:** Most animals will avoid school groups due to the noise students make. All animals should be observed quietly from a distance. Never approach, chase, or feed wildlife. Any contact, such as feeding, can be harmful to both the animal and the feeder. Ensure that picnic areas are cleaned up of all food remains. Feeding animals human food disrupts the natural feeding behaviour of wildlife and may make them associate humans with food, which is dangerous.
- **Insects:** Avoid biting insects by wearing long-sleeved, light coloured shirts and pants. Tuck pant legs into socks to protect from ticks. Avoid scents, including perfumed shampoo, soaps, and lotions, which may attract mosquitos. Repellents containing DEET can be sprayed or rubbed on to clothing likely to come in contact with low shrubs or grass. After an outing, teachers should carefully inspect themselves and their companions especially around the head and neck for ticks.
- **Plants:** The majority of safety hazards associated with plants can be avoided by reminding students to stay on the trail and to never pick or eat any plants or fungi. Learn how to identify stinging nettle, a plant that is widespread in B.C. and found in moist and disturbed areas, such as roadside ditches or trail margins. Stinging nettle has needle-like hairs on the stem and under the leaves that release an acid if touched, causing an irritating rash. Other plants to identify and avoid that are found in some regions of B.C. include poison ivy ("leaves of three, let it be") and poison hemlock, both of which can cause an allergic rash. Giant hogweed (giant cow parsnip) makes skin photosensitive, causing serious blisters and burning if the plant is handled. Search E-Flora B.C. to learn how to identify these plants and see if they are found in your region. [http://linnet.geog.ubc.ca/DB\\_Query/QueryForm.aspx](http://linnet.geog.ubc.ca/DB_Query/QueryForm.aspx)



Stinging nettle

## On Your Trip

- **Respect field trip location rules:** Be familiar with and obey the rules at the site if you are at a park or protected area. Some of these rules are in place for the safety of visitors. Respect private property boundaries.
- **Set boundaries.** Delineate boundaries while allowing space for students to explore an area. Students must be able to see or hear you at all times.
- **Stay together.** It is crucial to account for all students regularly. Establish your own system so that it is easy to account for all of your students. Some teachers give every student a number and they regularly practice calling off their number on outdoor excursions. Use a buddy system. Keep your buddy in sight at all times. If you get separated from the group, stay put! Establish a signal (a whistle, yodel, or bird call- "chickadee-dee-dee") to bring the students back to the group. Separate groups should establish rendezvous procedures and locations, and should plan to meet as



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a whole group regularly and take roll. When you bring everyone back to the circle or pre-determined meeting area, ask if everyone has their buddy with them.

- **Wash your hands after your exploration and before eating with hand sanitizer or soap and water.** If you apply insect repellent or sunscreen be sure to thoroughly wash your hands with soap and water and do not touch any animals, or water containing animals. Insect repellent, sunscreen, and other chemicals can be very harmful to some animals, especially amphibians.

## Site specific considerations

### Ponds and Wetlands

- Avoid getting too close to the water's edge. Know where any deep water areas or drop offs are and make it a "no go zone". Don't splash or push. If you are dip netting use spoons or other tools to handle aquatic insects rather than your hands. Some aquatic insects can deliver a painful (but non-venomous) bite.

### Forests

- Know the road system. If possible, do an advance dry run. Look for low-hanging branches and obstacles. School buses are not well designed for off-highway travel so look for steep grades, tight turns, and narrow stretches of road. They also are not allowed to go any place where they have to back-up.
- Watch for low hanging branches when on trails. Have students carefully hold a branch until the next student has passed by safely.
- Stay on developed trails or dry, solid rock areas with good footing

### Grasslands

- The Northern Pacific rattlesnake is B.C.'s only rattlesnake, a Species at Risk found in the dry, south-central interior valleys. Although they are venomous, rattlesnakes are generally shy and not aggressive. Rattlesnakes, like all snakes, are an important part of the ecosystem and deserve our respect. They are predators that help to keep their prey populations in check. The vast majority of snake bites are due to people deliberately trying to handle or harm the snake. Striking is a last resort that rattlesnakes use to protect themselves. If disturbed, a rattlesnake will try to stay camouflaged or escape. They will usually only rattle when cornered, surprised, or when they feel threatened. Remember, all snakes including rattlesnakes are protected under B.C.'s Wildlife Act. It is illegal to kill or harm snakes, or to remove them from the wild. Things to know:
  - If you see a rattlesnake, back away and give the snake space.
  - Avoid encounters with rattlesnakes by only putting your hands and feet where you can see them. Step around-not over- large logs and rocks. Do not turn over rocks or other objects under which a snake could be hidden (or if doing so, use a stick and not your hands).

### More Safety Resources

- For more tips on group management and the basic steps in bringing your students outdoors see *Get Outdoors: An Educator's Guide to Outdoor Classrooms* <https://hctfeducation.ca/product/get-outdoors/>
- Visit this excellent resource for taking youth outdoors. Most school districts in the province have adopted this protocol: <https://www.youthsafeoutdoors.ca>



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- If you hear a rattlesnake rattle, stop and be still and locate the snake. If you are close to the snake, remain still and allow the snake to calm down and back away. Once you are one snake body length away, step back and go around the snake.
- If you encounter a dead rattlesnake, don't touch it! The biting reflex remains intact even after death.
- Learn more about rattlesnake safety and how to distinguish the Northern Pacific rattlesnake from its look-alike, the Great Basin Gopher snake, from Wild Safe B.C.. <https://wildsafebc.com/rattlesnake/>



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