



Desert Safety



White Sands National Monument is a beautiful and pristine landscape. At times, however, that beauty can be deceiving, masking the potential for serious injuries that can befall the unwary. It is up to you to make sure you understand the nature of the environment you are entering and to be aware of hazards you may encounter. It is critical to be prepared and to know your limitations. Regardless of how much time you plan to spend at White Sands National Monument, please take a few moments to familiarize yourself these safety guidelines.

Be Prepared



Food and Water. The most critical factor for survival in a desert environment is access to water. Desert heat and low humidity can quickly lead to dehydration. Always carry extra water with you during all activities, such as hiking and sledding. Especially in the summer, at least one gallon (4 Liters) of water per person per day is recommended. Fill up water containers at the visitor center. There is no water available in the dunefield.

You will need more water than you think you will. Sweat evaporates quickly in the desert giving the false impression you are not sweating when in fact are sweating and losing water rapidly. When your water is half-gone, go back to your car. Food is also important to boost your morale and your energy. Keep emergency food with you such as fruit, nuts, energy bars and electrolyte replacement drinks or powders.

Staying Found

Stop do not wander!



It is easy to become disoriented in the dunefield. Have a plan. Tell someone, who is not with you, where you are going and when you plan to return. Stay with companions while hiking. Separation can mean getting lost. Always keep your children insight. Do not allow them get a head of you or fall behind.

If you become lost, **stop** and sit on top of a dune. Wandering can endanger your life and make finding you more difficult. Use a mirror or piece of aluminum foil to flash sunlight toward potential rescuers.

Use park trail markers. Carry a park map and compass. Orient yourself to landmarks such as mountains or a water tower. GPS can be unreliable here. Have a fully charged cellphone. Bring a portable charger if you have one. No outlets for electricity are available at the monument. Turn your cell phone off while hiking. Conserve battery power for emergencies. Be prepared for the unexpected.

If you have cell service, call 911. Describe your location to the dispatcher in as much detail as possible and your starting location. Data and cellular signal strength can vary drastically in the monument. You may be able to text for help to a friend who can call 911 for you. Each year, park rangers respond to dozens of search or rescue incidents in the monument. These frequently involve heat exhaustion, dehydration, and injuries.

Be Mindful



Sun/UV Rays - When planning your day be aware that the sun reflecting off the white sand is intense year round and can cause severe sunburns. Your best protection against the sun's harmful UV radiation is protective clothing, shelter, and time of day.

along Dunes Drive. You can also bring your own sun shelter or sun umbrella. Take breaks in the shade.

Wear a wide-brimmed hat, sunscreen with an SPF of 15 or higher, sunglasses, and lightweight loose-fitting clothing. Long sleeves and long pants help protect your skin from the sun. Sunburn reduces the skin's ability to release excess heat, making you more susceptible to heat-related illness.

Exposure to full sunshine can increase heat index values by up to 15°F (9°C). The sun's UV rays are the strongest at midday. Plan to your visit for early morning or late afternoon when the sun is lower.

Shade is a rare commodity in the dunefield. There are picnic areas with sheltered tables

Heat Exhaustion - Heat exhaustion occurs when the body loses more fluid than is taken in. Signs of heat exhaustion include nausea, vomiting, fatigue, headaches, pale appearance, stomach cramps, and cool clammy skin. If a member of your party begins to experience any of these

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symptoms, stop your hike immediately. Rest in a shaded area if possible, drink water slowly, loosen tight clothing, and apply cool wet cloths to the skin. If heat exhaustion symptoms persist, seek medical help.

Heat Stroke. Heat stroke is an advanced stage of heat exhaustion. It is the body's inability to cool itself. Symptoms include confusion, disorientation, behavioral changes, and seizures. If you believe that a member of your party is suffering from heat stroke, it is imperative to cool them using any available means and obtain immediate medical assistance.

Hypothermia. Hypothermia occurs when the body is cooled to dangerous levels. The most dangerous conditions are subtle ones cool but not cold. When temperatures are between 40°F to 60°F (4°C to 15°C), light winds of 5mph to 10mph (8kph - 16kph), and rain or mist.

Getting wet is the quickest way to lose body heat. Avoid cotton clothing. It provides no insulation when wet. Eat high energy food before you are chilled. Bring extra clothes for layering. The signs of hypothermia include uncontrollable shivering; stumbling and poor coordination; fatigue; and confusion or slurred speech.

Keep Your Eye on the Weather



Know the temperature before you hike. It's recommend that you do not start a hike if the temperature is at or above 85°F (30°C).

Wind. During our windy season, February through May, dust storms can move in fast and reduce visibility, greatly increasing the chances of becoming disoriented. Do not hike out during a windstorm or rely on your footprints to return to your car. Wind can erase your footprints in just minutes. Dust storms can also cause eyes injuries and damage breathing passages.

Heat. From May through August, daytime temperatures can exceed 100°F (38°C) and drop to approximately 65°F (18°C) at night. June is usually the hottest month of the year. **It's recommend that you do not start a hike if the temperature is at or above 85°F (30°C).**

Storms. July through September is monsoon season. Storms can quickly build. Lightning often occurs in the desert during thunderstorms even if there is no rain. Remember, when thunder roars go indoors. If you see a gathering storm or hear thunder, take cover in a building or vehicle with your windows rolled up. Lightning often strikes the tallest object in the area. Avoid high points (top of a dune) and ground currents (tree roots). If you're unable to avoid a thunderstorm, find an open low space on solid ground.

Make yourself a small target by crouching on your toes, hands covering your ears, and head between your knees.

Crouch down on a sleeping pad, pack, or other non-metal material to insulate yourself from ground currents. Touch the ground as little as possible; the ground conducts electricity. Do not lie flat. Remove all metal objects and electrical devices from your body. Space yourself at least 15 feet from your hiking companions.

Cold. From November through February early morning and nighttime temperatures are frequently be below freezing. Daytime temperatures can range from 30°F to 60°F (-1°C to 15 °C). Dress in and carry extra layers that can easily be removed or added as needed. A coat, hat, scarf, gloves, and warm boots are a good start. Since days are shorter, be mindful of the time and make sure you are back at your vehicle before it gets dark.

Do not forget to drink water! No matter the temperature, it is easy to get dehydrated while exploring the monument. Sunblock is still necessary even in the winter.

Venomous Creatures

Rattlesnakes, scorpions, black widows, and harvester ants are only a few of the venomous animals found in New Mexico. To avoid a bite, be mindful of where you walk, put your hands, or sit. Follow established trails and open sand, do not walk through vegetation where visibility is poor.

Never try to pick up, touch, or tease snakes and scorpions or handle spiders and insects. If bitten, seek immediate medical attention. Bring a photo of the animal along for identification if possible. Keep in mind that a dead rattlesnake can deliver a lethal bite.

Other Things You Need To Know

Pets. Pets are welcome in the monument. They must be on a six-foot (2 meters) leash and under physical control at all times. Carry plastic bags to clean up after your pet. Remember that your pet will also need water. Carry a bowl and extra water. Please do not leave your pet in the car during extreme temperatures.

Sledding. Pick a safe place to go sledding. Choose a dune that does lead into the road or the interdunal plant area. Dunes freeze in the winter. They are much harder than during the summer. This makes sledding faster, and it increases your chances of more serious fall or injury.

Dangerous Digging. Digging holes in the dunes is fun. Keep in mind that the dunes move and the sand is heavy. Holes can collapse on you. This can lead to suffocation.

Driving. Always wear your seat belt. All state traffic laws apply. Obey posted speed limits. Be aware that speed limits vary

throughout the monument from 45mph down to 15mph (72kph - 24kph). Use the pullouts for parking on the gypsum road. Be prepared for changing weather conditions. The gypsum road can be slippery when wet especially in the winter. It may also be harder to spot frozen water. For your safety, decrease your speed and brake gently to avoid skidding. If you have vehicle trouble, please do not leave your vehicle overnight without notifying a ranger.

Unexploded Ordinances. We are surrounded by an active missile range. From time to time, debris from missile tests falls into the monument and is buried by sand. If you see any strange objects, do not touch them as they may still be able to detonate. Make a note of their location and tell a ranger what you found and where you found it by going to the entrance station or visitor center. The ranger will dispatch appropriate personnel to remove the object in question.