The Responsible Gun Owner’s Guide to
Self-Defense in the Great Outdoors
Think about what a criminal really looks for when selecting a victim. Like all predators, a criminal wants some sort of advantage. That usually means he will select a target he believes he can overpower, and he’ll often do so by working with other criminals, ensuring greater numbers and obtaining the element of surprise or striking in a location where help will be slow to arrive.

The elements listed above are not exclusive to dark alleys in big cities. If you have ever seen the film *Deliverance*, you know what can happen if you are not ready to defend yourself when help is nowhere nearby.

I have said it before and will say it again here: Movies are not reality, and we should not get our training from Hollywood.

Back in 1990, Molly LaRue and Geoff Hood were killed at a remote shelter along the Appalachian Trail. These two murders sparked a huge manhunt and got plenty of media coverage. But between 1974 and 2011, there were nine other attacks along the trail that left 11 people dead. There is still plenty of argument among serious hikers about whether or not all of those people killed were through-hikers or day hikers and also whether or not the many more...
people killed along the side trails really count as hikers killed on the Appalachian Trail. Regardless of whether the body count is 11 or 31, the fact remains that violent attackers don’t care if you are on vacation or not. If you look like a victim, you will be preyed upon.

Lest you think that only people hiking in the remote wilderness need to fear an attack, know that the number of people robbed, raped or murdered while walking or jogging on urban or suburban trails is too large to tally here. I would not know where to begin except to say that criminal predators know that most people out on jogging trails are unarmed. Don’t be like most people. There are plenty of good options for carrying a gun while jogging or hiking. You do not have to leave your gun at home just because you want to exercise.

Don’t think you can read this story and simply say, “Well, I don’t hike in the wilderness. I camp in my RV.”

Recreational vehicles are nearly constant targets for criminals. Assuming the occupants of RVs are either elderly couples or young families traveling with children, you can see why a big motor home would make a good target. Are you ready to defend yourself and your family inside an RV? Do you know the laws surrounding personal defense as you travel from state to state? Planning a road trip means more than just checking gas prices and looking for road construction.

As distasteful as it might be, you cannot forget about your personal defense when you are on vacation or engaged in outdoor recreation. A criminal doesn’t care about you or your feeling of safety. In fact, it is just the opposite. He wants to take you by surprise and overpower you with violence or the threat of violence.

No matter where you go or what you do, it is your responsibility to defend yourself. Be ready. Always.
Our family lives in an area of the country that provides a myriad of outdoor sports opportunities year round. We cross-country ski and ride our snowmobiles in the wintertime. When the snow is gone, we hike and explore backcountry trails on our four-wheelers almost every weekend. On occasion, we encounter wildlife on our trips to the woods, but more often than not, they peacefully go their way and we ours. Recently, there was a bear attack on some hikers not too far from us, and it caused us some alarm since we travel those same trails.

This past summer, we heard of a couple being robbed at a remote trailhead that we sometimes use. This got our attention to the point of doing a little investigation about the amount of illegal activity taking place in our state’s recreation areas, and we were absolutely shocked at the amount of criminal activity going on where we once felt totally safe.

Between the animal attacks and the human predators, we have decided to buy a handgun and take it with us when we go on our backcountry trips.
Can you give us some tips on what kind of handgun we should buy and also how to carry it? Would we need to get a concealed carry permit to carry a gun in our backpacks? Some of the trails we travel pass through state and national parks. One crosses the border between two states. How does that affect our ability to carry a handgun with us?

ANSWER: The concerns you have are real, and I’m glad you’re choosing to be proactive rather than resigning yourselves to be potential victims of circumstance.

The first thing I would advise you to do is to think your situation through thoroughly to determine what you really need to accomplish — what you want to achieve.

Many uninformed people buy a handgun for convenience rather than performance. Many will purchase a small pistol or revolver and then rarely (if ever) shoot it. If the firearm is in a caliber substantial enough to kill a bear, as in your case, the recoil would be so violent that an effective shot on the bear would stem more from luck than from skill.

My advice is to start simple and work up from there. A stainless-steel .357 Magnum revolver with a 4-inch barrel is a good place for most people to start. It allows you to train with lower-powered .38 Special cartridges on the range but carry .357 Magnum cartridges on the field. You will, however, need to practice with the .357 Magnum ammunition prior to your field trips so that you will know what to expect should you ever have to put the gun to its intended use.

I need to add that I, along with my colleagues, view the .357 Magnum cartridge with 158-grain or heavier bullets as the bare minimum with which a bear should be engaged. My personal preference is the .44 Magnum, but that caliber is not for beginners. With practice and marksmanship skill advancement, the .44 Magnum might be a future consideration for you.
I would recommend that you obtain a concealed carry permit for each state in which you recreate. That way, if you have to throw on a poncho during a rainstorm, there should be no question as to whether you are carrying legally or not.

If I am equipped only with a handgun, I prefer to carry concealed, regardless of the situation. The reason is simply because I don’t want to advertise what my capabilities are until they are needed. Besides outright avoidance of an incident, the element of surprise gives one a huge tactical advantage.

I would recommend against carrying a gun in your backpack because of time and accessibility factors. It would take precious time to take a backpack off and get to your gun. If you’re ever involved in an altercation in a camp or a parking lot, your backpack might not be anywhere near you, making access your main concern.

It is always better to have your handgun on your person for a quick and easy draw. A shoulder or chest holster is comfortable and convenient to access when you’re riding an off-road vehicle or hiking, although there is nothing wrong with a strong-side, belt-mounted holster if it works for you. The bottom line is to have your gun available when you need it, which, again, stems from convenience and comfort in addition to the reason it’s being carried in the first place (this applies to a human predator as well as a wildlife encounter).

I wish I had an easier answer for you regarding traveling through different recreation areas, but without knowing specific information about your travel routes, the answers vary widely. My recommendation is to list all of the areas through which you may potentially travel, such as parks, tribal lands and designated state and federal recreation areas. Then contact each individually to verify what is acceptable in that jurisdiction. Be aware that changes are often made without notification, so a pre-trip check is prudent prior to leaving home.

Have fun enjoying the outdoors, and enjoy the addition of shooting sports to your list of recreational activities. It’s a lifelong endeavor!
Enjoying a remote adventure, alone or among family and friends, combines the pristine grandeur of a wilderness setting with a challenge to your outdoor know-how and self-reliance skills. A vital part of that is knowing how to prepare should you ever encounter a situation in defense of life or property (DLP). Even venturing into managed areas such as national parks, designated wilderness areas, refuges and other outdoor recreation sites — particularly those with expansive sections of remote backcountry — requires the prudent outdoor adventurer to maintain a heightened level of DLP awareness and readiness.

Though extremely rare and highly unlikely, the most common life-threatening, animal-related scenarios in our national parks and other similar recreational areas involve large, carnivorous animals such as brown bears, black bears, wolves and mountain lions. Even a confrontation with a moose can result in a fatal kick or being crushed by a huge set of antlers. Then there’s always the human threat too.

Often, the threatening hand dealt to you doesn’t allow you the option of playing the avoidance card. Instead, you might be forced, sometimes traumatically, into the “flight-or-fight” mode. In backcountry, where access is limited to flying, floating or footing it in, an effective retreat is not often a viable alternative either. Carrying a firearm might be your only lifesaving option and ultimate DLP course of action.
In 2010, Public Law 111-24 made it legal to possess firearms in national parks and refuges. You may carry a firearm, concealed or otherwise, as long as applicable federal, state and local firearms laws in the state in which the park is located allow your possession of that weapon. That law does not, however, change prohibitions on the use of firearms in national parks or affect any hunting regulations. And even if it’s legal to carry a firearm within a park’s boundaries, it’s still not legal to discharge it.

These regulations were adopted with specific scrutiny toward each state’s laws (including non-restricting laws) regarding the carrying of concealed weapons. Certain areas within federal recreation areas (visitor centers, offices, etc.) still enforce site-specific bans on firearms.

“More than 30 national parks are located in more than one state, so visitors need to know where they are in those parks and which state’s law applies,” said Kathryn Warnes, grant management specialist with the National Park Service. National Park websites have been updated to include links to each state’s firearms laws.

A firearm-carrying visitor’s responsibility becomes even more challenging when that individual crosses an international border. Minnesota’s Boundary Waters Canoe Areas Wilderness (BWCAW) and Voyageurs National Park are two specific examples of how complex this particular law can become if you haven’t done your firearms possession homework.

Because these areas share a water border with Canada, there is no visible line to tell you when you’ve boated into our northern neighbor’s waters. Cross the line at Voyageurs and you must now also abide by Canada’s firearms laws, which prohibit handguns but might allow certain types of “camp guns.” However, absolutely no firearms of any sort are allowed in Quetico Provincial Park, the BWCAW counterpart.
unit on the Canadian side of the vast boundary waters region that shares many border lakes with the United States. It is up to an individual to make arrangements to deal with a firearm in his or her possession before entering Canada.

Many of the laws between adjoining states conflict. Boaters cruising the boundary between Minnesota and Wisconsin on the St. Croix River, where an imaginary border line runs down the center of the channel, must abide by whichever state’s laws regarding concealed firearms apply.

At time of publication, there are 32 states whose handgun possession laws are “not substantially similar” to Minnesota’s firearms possession laws, and, as such, permits issued in those states are not valid in Minnesota. Furthermore, laws in the state where a firearm is registered do not supersede Minnesota’s laws or regulations. In the case where a portion of two or more states lie within a park boundary, it is up to each individual to check the status of laws in each of those particular states.

While the question of whether it is legal to carry a concealed weapon in a national park has been answered by Public Law 111-24, the need to carry a firearm for DLP in those parks and other backcountry recreation areas continues to be one of personal preference and ongoing debate and discussion.

Even before this new firearms possession law was tacked on as a rider to the Credit Card Accountability Responsibility and Disclosure Act, proponents of the law were applauding it as yet another expression of the country’s Second Amendment rights. Opponents, however, feared its passing would cause a heightened potential for gun-related mishaps in otherwise pristine and safe environments. The law is still too new to have been subject to enough statistical scrutiny to solidly confirm or dispute the concerns regarding occurrences of firearms-related violent behavior in national parks.

According to a posting on the National Parks Traveler website, Part I crimes (murder, rape, robberies, etc.) increased by approximately 700 cases in 2012, up from 2,900 incidents the year before. Fraud, vandalism and other Part II offenses dropped from 113,000 in 2012 to 105,000 in 2013. Those numbers represent incidents from a base of more than 280 million annual visitations to parks throughout the nation. Whether or not a firearm was involved was not included in the findings, but statistics matter little if you and your family are confronted by a deadly threat.

Consider an incident that occurred on a border lake in the BWCAW several years prior to the passing of this law. Randomly firing into the air and surroundings using an assortment of

**NOTE:**

You can learn more about each state’s firearms laws by entering “firearms” or “concealed weapons” in the search box at: [USA.gov/Agencies/State-and-Territories.shtml](http://USA.gov/Agencies/State-and-Territories.shtml).
In bear country, you might even consider procuring a specific woods gun apart from your usual carry gun; a .380 doesn’t work particularly well against this fellow.

Weapons, a half dozen drunk men, operating boats powered by outboards (illegal on a section of this particular lake), raided several remote campsites and spent hours terrorizing canoe campers on Basswood Lake. It was a rare incident that has not been repeated (at least within the remote BWCAW) in the years since. Nonetheless, those campers were defenseless against this attack. Under the revised law, members of those campsites could legally possess weapons to use in self-defense. Whether such counter-actions would have evolved into an even more dangerous situation fuels an ongoing debate.

Defense against attacks by wild animals has always been a valid concern among those who frequent the backcountry of America in areas where there is a heightened chance that one might encounter a huge carnivorous animal. However, incidents resulting in death are extremely rare. According to an article in the *Journal of Wildlife Management*, through a 25-year period in Alaska, 52 brown bears and 38 black bears (5 percent and 3 percent, respectively, of the total bears killed during that period) were dispatched in defense of life or property. Of that number, there were no human injuries in 98.5 percent of brown bear incidents and none in 99.2 percent of incidents involving black bears. Still, during the period from 1985 to 1996, bear attacks did result in 36 injuries to humans and six deaths.

Unlike brown bears and grizzly bears common to (and an attraction of) several parks in Alaska, Montana and Wyoming, encounters with black bears can occur throughout much broader regions of the U.S. Other animals that can present a serious threat to humans include mountain lions, wolves and moose.

National Park District Ranger Wendy Artz offered basic advice common to bear country everywhere.

“Be places where bears expect to see you — open areas, river banks, beaches, etc.,” she said. “If you have to pass through an area where bears can’t see you, make noise, talk loud, sing out loud, etc.”

In Alaska, wildlife regulations require people to stay 50 yards away from bears. “But there are bears who need more space,” Artz said.
Although popular firearms in Alaska include .44s in chest holsters, many people prefer to carry shotguns.

“When I’m in the backcountry, I carry my .40 service weapon in a chest holster and a marine flare in my pants pocket,” Artz said. “I have not had to use either one.”

Most outfitters in the BWCAW argue against the need to carry a firearm into the wilderness area.

“I have been in the outfitting business for 51 years, and I have never recommended carrying a firearm into the BWCAW or Quetico Park,” said Dan Waters of Canadian Waters Outfitters. “There are simply no dangers that would warrant carrying a firearm into the canoe country.”

Steve Piragis, owner of Piragis Northwoods Company in Ely, Minnesota, agrees.

“It’s really a non-issue,” Piragis said. “I always discourage anyone from carrying a gun. It’s just asking for an accident or unwise use. … [Bear attacks] are so rare as to even be mentioned in my opinion.”

Frank Udovich, the owner of Kawishiwi Lodge and Outfitters in the BWCAW, said that it really comes down to a matter of preference, one now made easier by the new law regarding firearms in national parks.

“I personally would like to carry a gun at all times but feel the chance for an accident outweighs the need for one,” Udovich said.

“Also, most of my friends and locals bring guns into the wilderness. It normally isn’t even something discussed. You get to camp, people pull out guns, no surprise. It’s almost like, ‘Where’s the ketchup?’”

As far as a preferred weapon for DLP, particularly against attacks from large critters, .40-caliber service sidearms, .44 Magnum revolvers and shotguns appear to be the weapons of choice among those who carry firearms in the public and private sectors. Bear spray is a serious option as an alternative or complement to a firearm, and many feel it is equal to or better than a firearm for deterring animals or humans.

There are no definitive answers as to whether or not you should possess a firearm when adventuring within a national park or other similar area or which caliber to use if you do. Clearly, owners of firearms should be proficient and comfortable with their weapons if they are going to use them as effective and safe tools in defense of life and property. Public Law 111-24 now extends that right and responsibility throughout most of our national parks and other recreation lands as well.
A question I get a lot is, “Can I legally carry a firearm in my recreational vehicle?” Unfortunately, there are no easy or simple answers.

Veteran RVers and most gun owners know that many laws apply regardless of where, when or how one travels in an RV. A myriad of regulations, rules and questionable, confusing statutes often accompany those laws.

Recent surveys show that more than 40 percent of the 20-million-plus U.S. RV owners carry firearms in their vehicles or trailers. However, the number in that group who have concealed carry permits from their own or other states has not been determined. It is a fact, however, that carrying a firearm in a vehicle without a permit or license is not legal in every state. All 50 states can, under law, issue concealed carry permits to law-abiding citizens, though many have stringent requirements and qualifications and often seem to play politics on approvals.

Several bills to establish reciprocity among all states’ concealed carry permits have been introduced in Congress in recent years, but not a single one has ever been passed. In a nutshell, it is a good rule of thumb for the RVer to learn and know the laws regarding concealed carry in each and every state through which he or she might travel or visit. According to the National Rifle Association and other pro-gun
groups, firearms can be transported legally in most states if they are unloaded, cased and inaccessible to the driver. If possible, it is wise to place them in a locked box or on-board safe. That, of course, applies only when the RV is moving.

When the RV is not moving and is attached to utilities or parked for a lengthy period of time, it is considered a "second home" in most states and is recognized as such in states with Castle Doctrine laws. Even here, however, the legal language varies from state to state and is sometimes vague and complex.

At time of publication, there has been no federal court ruling on whether the RV is a home or a vehicle. Thus, wise RV travelers with a carry permits should thoroughly check with each state they intend to visit on any trip.

Otherwise, all states fall into "Right-to-Carry Reciprocity and Recognition" categories that are complicated at best, change often when legislatures amend state laws and need to be studied and scrutinized by RVers with permits when they plan out-of-state trips.

Here are a number of tips to keep in mind when you’re making travel plans:

1. Most importantly, you must comply with all laws — state, federal and local. Always carry a copy or two of your permit with you (on your person, in your vehicle or both).
2. Right-to-carry laws often change, some nearly every year when legislatures meet. Check for up-to-date information on all the states you intend to visit.
3. If you have doubts about your RV carry rights in any state, contact that state’s attorney general office.
4. Your RV is a “second home.” Treat it as such.
5. When you’re parked in a legal area or campground, keep loaded guns where you can reach them before an intruder can. Consider keeping loaded handguns in small safes that can be opened easily and quickly via fingerprint or thumbprint.
6 Handguns stashed in holsters that attach easily to beds with “under-mattress” flaps, hang from hooks on RV walls or strap to windshield-type visors serve well in parked RVs.

7 Regardless of the permits you hold, never cross the Canadian or Mexican border with firearms unless permits have been arranged with respective government agencies well in advance.

8 Check federal laws concerning concealed carry at National Parks, National Wildlife Refuge areas, National Forests, Native American Reservations and lands, and parks and campgrounds administered by federal agencies, such as U.S. Army Corps of Engineers lakes, campgrounds, wildlife management and viewing areas. Restrictions on carry can apply and often change between all of them.

9 Never boast, brag or advertise that you have guns aboard your RV, regardless of the permits you hold.

A case in point: Several years ago, an RV owner in California — a state with very restrictive laws on carrying weapons of any kind — was stopped by law enforcement officers for a speeding violation. In the process, an officer noticed that the unit had an NRA membership sticker and an “Insured by Smith & Wesson” sign on the back window of the coach. When asked, the owner acknowledged that he had guns aboard, not realizing it was an offense in that particular area. The result was an arrest, fine and confiscation of several weapons.

When you plan a trip, the best advice is to do a lot of research. Learn about gun laws in states you intend to visit. Do your homework and check frequently as laws and reciprocity often change.

GUN LAWS
Learn about gun laws in the areas you intend to travel. Some of the best internet sources include:

- USCCA.com/Laws
- NRAILA.org/Gun-Laws.aspx
- USACarry.com
- AllStays.com
Brad was forced to defend himself with pepper spray during a road-rage attack. But when the police arrived, HE was the one charged with assault! That’s when the USCCA stepped in to help...

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