

Safety for Arch Hunters

Do you have a grip on it?

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Arch hunting is fun and exhilarating for arch nuts like us. In our quest for fun, though, many of us simply do not think about safety, when in fact arch hunting is inherently dangerous. Arches are made of rock, and the softest rock is harder than our heads (OK, my wife has argued that my head is harder than the hardest rock, but that's another story!). Depending on where you plan to go, the potential dangers can be numerous in the great outdoors. While most of these dangers are quite obvious, some are not, and that's where you can get into trouble in a New York minute. Here I will discuss these dangers of arch hunting and how to mitigate them using a variety of tools. For general outdoor safety issues, however, a vast storehouse of knowledge is available in print and on the Internet, so those issues will not be discussed here (such as fire safety, food safety and abandoned mine safety).

While the information presented here is targeted toward the more avid arch hunter (in terms of difficulty of the trip), accidents can happen anywhere and at any time. For example, you could slip and fall on some ice while walking along the short paved pathway that leads from the parking lot to the arch. Therefore I recommend that every NABS member read this entire article and review it once in a while to refresh your memory and skills.

I present each arch hunting safety issue in its relative order of importance. Topping the list is rule number one...

1. NEVER GO ALONE

If at all possible, never venture out alone. Having that other person along can sometimes make the difference between life and death. For example, if you were to fall and break your ankle, you would be just fine if there were someone with you who can go back to get help. But, if you're alone, there's no way you're going to be able to walk, or even crawl out to get help. If you were just planning to do a day hike, you'd end up spending the night out and possibly facing extreme weather conditions with little to no equipment to cope with it. This could translate into hypothermia (super-cooling of the body) or heat stroke (super-heating of the body), either of which can kill you in a matter of hours without some sort of shelter. **Hypothermia is the leading killer of outdoor recreationists**, and most victims who have died of it died because they ventured out alone. If you just can't stand it and **MUST** travel alone, be absolutely sure to tell someone where and when you're going, and, just as important, tell them when you plan to return. And, stick to your plan. You should do this whether traveling alone or not, but when alone this will ensure that someone will be looking for you during your "window of

survivability." One more good reason to have someone else along is that two heads are better than one when judging conditions, routes, situations, etc.

Cross-checking: When on a trip with multiple people and/or vehicles, always cross-check between vehicles and groups of people to be sure everyone is accounted for. NABS has had at least one instance where a member was left behind and had to hike an extra 5 miles in the dark to get back to the starting point where he had left his vehicle because of a failure to cross-check (i.e. the group split into two and each group assumed that he was with the other group).

Personal Locator Beacons: PLB for short, is a device used to contact search and rescue personnel in the event of an emergency. Typically they are satellite based communicators and come with a variety of options including the ability to send text messages. These days they are relatively inexpensive compared to when this article was first published in 2009. All of these devices require a subscription service that is usually renewed annually at reasonable or minimal cost. When you register for your subscription, you provide vital information about yourself and whom rescue personnel should contact in case the unit is activated.

Every arch hunter should have a PLB! I have never had to use mine, but on each and every trip it provides peace of mind for both me and my loved ones whether I am trekking alone or not.

2. THE "EXPERIENCE FACTOR"

There are three ways to get into trouble here. First, there is the person who has not had the necessary cumulative outdoor experience during his/her lifetime to match the difficulty of the trip. Second, there is the person who has so much outdoor experience that s/he loses respect for nature because they "already know it all." And, thirdly, there is the aging factor - you may have lots of experience and respect for nature, but you could misjudge your abilities due to the effects of aging on your body. Avoiding these pitfalls is simply a matter of doing your homework - find out as much as you can about the difficulty of your potential route(s). Then, ask yourself some hard questions and be honest with yourself about the answers: Am I in good physical shape? Do I have any chronic medical conditions or injuries which might need attention and/or mitigation during the trip? Do I have any experiences to draw on which might be similar to the trip I am about to make? And, if so, what did I learn from that experience? If not, how can I gain as much knowledge as possible before attempting the trip? Bottom line: Do your abilities and physical condition match the difficulty of the proposed trip? We at NABS have developed a trip rating system to make it easier for you to match trips to your abilities - use it! (the rating system can be found on the NABS web site members-only section).

3. "KINETIC SAFETY" - Walking, Hiking and Climbing

Arch hunting almost always involves some degree of hiking or walking, and sometimes involves non-technical rock climbing (or "mountain climbing" as some folks call it; technical climbing methods and issues will not be discussed here). The biggest danger here is...you guessed it...falling. Falling can cause injuries anywhere from a minor scrape to death. Here are the tools I use to avoid falling. I still fall once in a while, but when I *have* fallen, it's because I was not making prudent use of these tools:

Balance: You should know your limits regarding balance, because maintaining proper balance is your first defense against falls. Are you known in sports circles for your incredible balance, or are you generally known as a "clutz?" Or, are you somewhere in between? Are you able to adjust quickly to a change in your orientation, such as if the rock you are standing on moves? One tool I use to maintain balance is by being "loose." I keep my muscles relaxed as much as possible so that they can respond more quickly to any given situation. There are exercises you can do to improve your balance (there are many sources describing such exercises, both on the Internet and in print). Keeping your ears free of excess wax and dirt can improve balance. For people who just naturally do not have great balance, I recommend using a pair of trekking poles. When climbing up steep areas of rock in place (as opposed to talus slopes), always maintain a three-point stance (i.e., three of your four limbs/trekking poles are touching the rock). On talus slopes, it's a good idea to just assume that the rock you will be stepping on will move, and be ready to make split-second adjustments to your orientation and balance in response to that move.

Scoping: Always watch where you are stepping, and plan each step in advance according to what you see (this is called *scoping*). Scoping is a challenge for arch hunters because they are always looking up and around for arches and not where they are stepping. I recommend that you ALWAYS STOP if for any reason you cannot or will not be looking at the ground. Besides losing your balance, there are other reasons to watch where you step, including the presence of dangerous animals such as rattlesnakes.

Footwear: Always make sure you have appropriate footwear and that it is in good shape. Worn soles lose traction. When a sole comes loose on the edge, it can cause tripping. Holes in shoes or boots can let in rocks and gravel, creating a distraction when you are balancing and/or scoping. Not to mention the comfort factor...

Fatigue: Always keep in mind that whatever your abilities are when you begin a trip, they will slowly erode over the course of the trip. Fatigued or tired people are much more likely to fall or make some other mistake. There are two tools to mitigate this problem: rest often if necessary, and compensate for your fatigue or tiredness by going more slowly.

Conditions: Weather and/or ground conditions are often a contributing cause to falls. All of the following can throw you off balance and cause a fall: ice, snow, wind, water, wet mosses and other plants, wet leaf matter, and, believe it or not, large quantities of dead

insects can be very slippery! Use good judgment when encountering any of these hazards. This may mean taking another route, using special equipment such as trekking poles or crampons, or even aborting the entire trip. Remember...this is *recreation* - you should never be in a hurry or feel that you "just have to make that trip." There is also the possibility that you could become "trapped" by changing weather or ground conditions - conditions that are different toward the end of your trip than they were at the beginning.

4. NAVIGATION

I have seen so many people who venture out into hostile environments without knowing where they're going. Or, more importantly, *where they have been*. Almost every time I venture forth, there is at least one party I meet asking me for directions. Of course, I'm glad to oblige. But, what they don't know *can* hurt them if they become lost. In this day and age, with Global Positioning Systems and modern maps, there is almost no excuse for getting lost! Extreme weather might be one possible exception. Most states hold lost people accountable for the cost of their rescue operations. The use of helicopters and the like can make a rescue *very* expensive! It'd take Tom Brady an entire football game to pay for that!

ALWAYS follow these rules for navigation:

ALWAYS carry detailed maps (paper or electronic), at least 1:100,000 scale or smaller, of the areas you are interested in.

ALWAYS carry a compass, preferably a good one, even if you carry a GPS unit (some of the newer GPS units have a built-in compass, but GPS units need batteries and a good compass does not - ALWAYS carry a compass!). And, you must know how to use the maps, GPS and compass. There are many sources of maps and map/GPS education. ALWAYS plan a route. Planning usually saves time and effort.

I've noticed that there are many NABS members who "just want to be taken to the arch" on a guided trip. They pay no attention to the route; they are simply following the leader. Ignorance is not bliss in this case. I recommend that everyone on a given trip have at least a basic familiarity with the area in question. They should also pay attention to landmarks encountered along the route. If they were to become separated from the group, they would at least have some idea of how to get back to the starting point or to find the group along the route.

If you do get lost, the recommended action is to *stay put* and wait for help. However, if no one knows where you went or when you are supposed to return, you have no choice but to move along if you can and try to find help. Or just press the button on your PLB!

5. WATER

Always be absolutely certain of your water sources before starting on a trip. Are there springs or streams along the route? Do you have a way to purify the water from these

sources? In addition to the traditional filters and chemical treatments, a new way to purify water is to treat it with ultraviolet light. There are several brands of devices that can do this. I have a "Steri-pen."

In desert areas, I recommend carrying one gallon of water per person per day. Even if you know of water sources in desert areas, they are often unreliable. On the desert trips I have lead for NABS, I can't seem to get people to carry enough water - they often run out before the end of the trip. One gallon per person per day, please!

On the other side of the coin, a condition known as hyponatremia (*high-po-nah-tree-me-uh*) occurs when one drinks too much water out of fear of dehydration. This condition can be equally as serious as dehydration! The excess water causes the sodium in your blood to be drawn out to the lower intestines. Symptoms are headache, irritability, weakness and anorexia. The best treatment for hyponatremia is to drink liquids with high sodium and carbohydrate content, such as Gatorade. The carbs help your body to absorb the sodium through a process called "co-transportation."

6. FIRST AID

Always make sure at least one person in your group has a basic first aid kit. Learn as much as you can about first aid through the many sources available - books, Internet, etc.

7. WEATHER

Change-ups: Weather can change quickly, so always be prepared for a wide variety of weather conditions. In Colorado they say "if you don't like the weather in Colorado, wait about 20 minutes."

Lightning: By far the most dangerous weather phenomenon is lightning. If you can hear thunder, you are at risk of a lightning strike. Stay off of ridges and other high places, and away from tall trees or other tall objects such as flag poles. In most cases, being underneath an arch is relatively safe. An exception might be if you are under a shelter type arch, which is almost always atop a ridge. And, don't flail those trekking poles above your head- that's worse than wielding a golf club!

8. EQUIPMENT

To maximize your fun and safety, here's a little list of things I always carry along:

- Water sufficient for the trip, and maybe a little extra for unusual situations I might encounter.
- Rain gear
- Wool hat
- Binoculars
- GPS Unit
- Extra batteries for GPS unit
- PLB unit

- Compass
- Maps (paper and electronic)
- Rope or hand line (I actually use this more for getting packs up and down steep inclines than I do for assistance in climbing)
- Snack foods
- First aid kit
- Measuring device (steel tape or laser range finder - I use a knotted rope because it is lightweight)

SAFE = FUN!

Arch hunting is all about fun - but you cannot have any fun without first being safe. To help ensure your fun meter gets maxed out, never go alone; know your abilities; tread carefully; know where you are going and where you have been; know your water sources and quantities; carry first aid supplies; be aware of weather conditions, and bring the proper equipment to be prepared for a wide variety of situations. Happy Arch Hunting!!!