

Forest rangers: Stay off icy lakes and streams

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PISGAH NATIONAL FOREST – The curvy, two-lane Forest Heritage Scenic Byway, aka U.S. 276, which runs along the Davidson River and through the heart of the forest, looked more like a July 4 traffic jam over the weekend than a cold and lonely winter day.

The lure during the chilly temperatures? The rarely seen frozen Looking Glass Falls, a 60-foot-high stunner that can be easily seen by pulling off the road.

But simply Snapchatting from the safely built overlooks wasn't enough for most of the throngs of people, according to U.S. Forest Service rangers.

Many people slipped or wiped out on the thin ice coating the steps to the base of the falls, and also fell in the moving water under the ice in the waterfall pool.

People were seen straddling the river to get a closer look at the falls, which was frozen in cauliflower-like bunches on its sides but was gushing plenty down the center line.

Some visitors took things a step further and tried to walk on the floating chunks of ice in the Davidson River, only to fall through.

Forest Service spokeswoman Cathy Dowd said there were no serious injuries. But even short periods of time in the frigid water can lead to hypothermia, a dangerous lowering of body temperature, and drowning.

However, as the temperatures are expected to climb into the 50s this week, she said the risk for hazards will only continue.

"Large slabs of hanging ice and icicles on cliffs and waterfalls will fail and fall and could cause serious injury or death to those in the immediate vicinity," she said. "Ice that had frozen over streams is thinning and is not safe to walk across in most areas."

Falling trees and branches are always a hazard in the forest, but during the winter, and especially after the prolonged deep freeze over Western North Carolina for the past week and a half, snow and ice makes tree failure more likely.

The freeze-thaw cycle can loosen rocks, which can roll onto roads and trails. Drivers and hikers should also be aware of the potential for icy conditions

on shaded areas of roads and trails and take into account that thawing roads, roadsides, and trails are more susceptible to rutting, Dowd said.

Visitors should choose activities that minimize the potential for damage.

Many roads remain snow-covered and icy due to colder temperatures at high elevations. While gates may be open, drivers should not assume that roads are safe for travel, Dowd said.

Hickory Nut Falls, a more than 300-foot waterfall in Chimney Rock State Park, was frozen as of Jan. 8. The park is open 10 a.m. to 4:30 p.m., and hikers can take the moderate trail to view the falls if they're in the park by 4:30, said park spokeswoman Landdis Hollifield. Climbing on the waterfall is not allowed.

"They may not be able to use the viewing platform, because sometimes it does ice over, but they'll be able to see

the falls from the end of the trail," she said. "It's not unusual for the falls to ice over, but the amount of ice we've seen during this cold spell has been amazing. Our park naturalists were blown away by the blue color that's beginning to show, because of how thick the ice is."

The Blue Ridge Parkway is also a popular recreation spot during the winter. Although much of the road is closed in North Carolina — it is open in the Asheville corridor from Milepost 393 at Brevard Road to Milepost 382 at the Folk Art Center — visitors can park on the road sides or at the visitor center parking lots and walk behind the gates.

Parkway spokeswoman Leesa Brandon said people can still enjoy the parkway when it's closed to motor vehicles with snow sports such as sledding, tubing, snowshoeing and cross-country skiing, as well as climbing on frozen rock faces and waterfalls.

But "visitors need to think of safety first," she said.

The Forest Service advises the following safety tips for winter recreation:

- Avoid traveling alone. If you must travel alone, share your plans. Tell someone where you are going and when you expect to return.

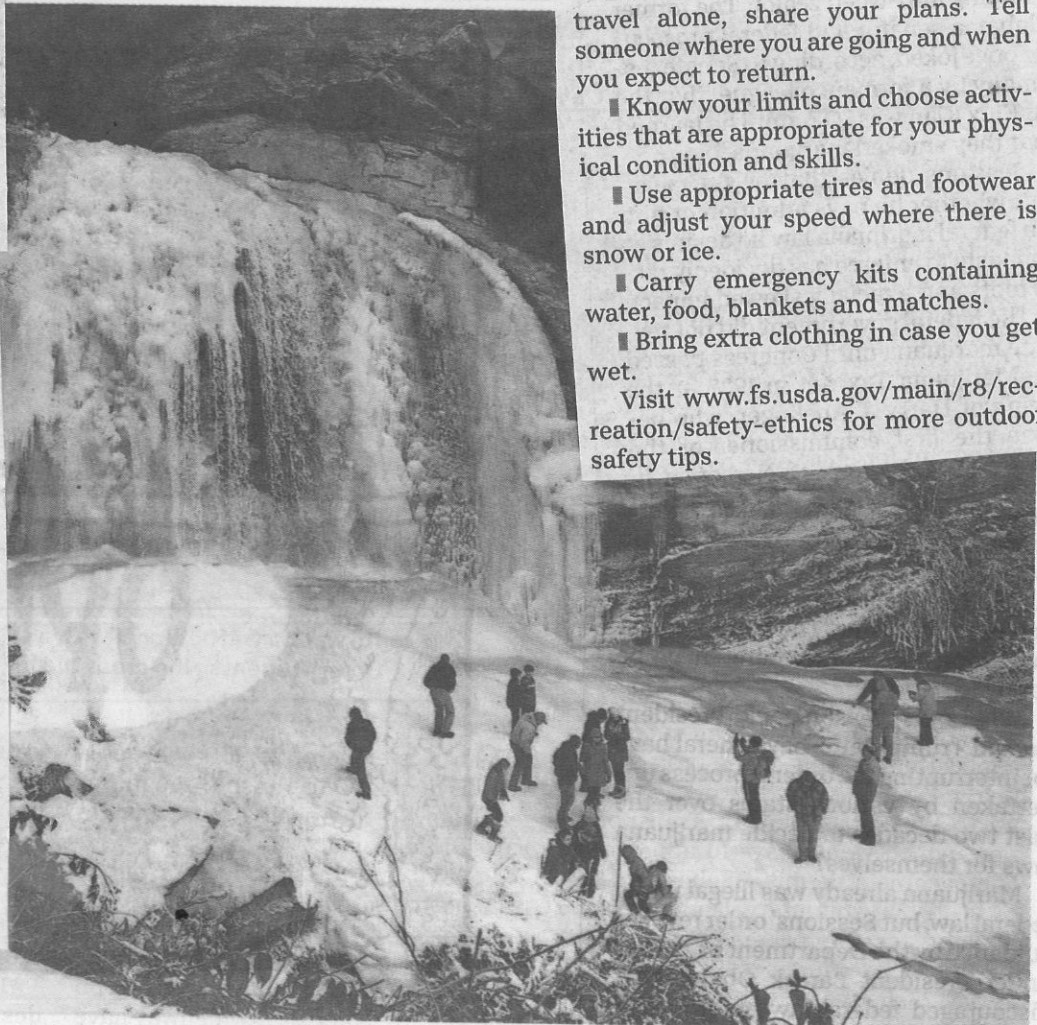
- Know your limits and choose activities that are appropriate for your physical condition and skills.

- Use appropriate tires and footwear and adjust your speed where there is snow or ice.

- Carry emergency kits containing water, food, blankets and matches.

- Bring extra clothing in case you get wet.

Visit www.fs.usda.gov/main/r8/recreation/safety-ethics for more outdoor safety tips.



Unusually high numbers of visitors came to see the frozen Looking Glass Falls on U.S. 276 over the weekend.

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