

Awareness, attitude key to hiking, camping safety

By **LYNNE MARGOLIS**
Collegian Staff Writer

Editor's Note: This is the first of a two-part series on hiking and camping in Centre County.

Summer seems to stir the wanderlust within us all, igniting searches for that magic place to escape from city sounds and everyday hassles. In quest of the ultimate getaway, more and more people are heading for the woods.

Centre County offers many areas for paradise-seekers to explore — whether they're out for just a short walk or backpacking into the heart of the wilderness — to really get away from it all.

But before I point in any directions, a few words of basic advice are necessary: only attempt a journey if you are prepared and willing to act responsibly in the environment you choose.

The first commandment of a responsible woodsman is to conserve the area.

In the words of a nature expert I once knew: "Never walk on what you can walk over, and never walk over what you can walk around."

Besides the safety factor involved (you're less likely to trip and fall), it's important to protect the flora and fauna that abound in nature. If you trample it all, there won't be any left for you or others to enjoy.

Lots of people walk along, pulling leaves off trees and grabbing up every little wildflower they can get their hands on. They don't seem to realize the effect this has on an area. Too much wildlife already has been destroyed by careless humans. Don't be the cause of any more harm.

And don't use more than you have to when building fires or foraging for wild edibles (never eat something unless you are sure what it is).

Don't build a bonfire to roast marshmallows; don't pluck a dozen mayapples if you plan to eat only two. There's lots of firewood and lots of fruit, but there won't be any if you waste or hog it all.

Remember to remove everything you

brought into the woods. Besides the forest fire, the worst tragedy of the wilderness is the litter-bug. Make sure you're not guilty of that crime.

If each hiker or camper picked up just one piece of litter, think how clean the forest could be.

Along with being responsible for your surroundings, be careful to watch out for yourself. Though I've never been ambushed by Big Foot, I have had several close calls with less-than-friendly copperheads and over-grown poison ivy patches.

The best protection against most outdoor variables is your clothing. Forget about the height of fashion; when you're in the woods, all that matters is the sensibility, not style, of your clothes.

Last summer when I was a camp "nature-crafts specialist," my well-known motto was "long pants and hard shoes" for hiking. The kids who wore shorts and sandals in the woods always ended up with scratched legs, stubbed toes, and the greatest number of insect bites.

If you don't have hard shoes, wear good tennis shoes, and if you must wear shorts, at least wear high socks. Always wear socks in the woods to protect your ankles, not to mention your precious feet.

The more skin you cover, the less you'll be exposed to mosquitoes, thorns and poison ivy.

Know how to spot poison ivy! There's always three leaves with a red dot in the center, where they join. But it's not always shiny or green; it often appears dusty or yellowed. The ivy can be a two-inch high weed, a waist-high monster, a vine or even a bush. Have someone who's certain what it is point it out to you. The same goes for poison sumac and oak.

A little reptile knowledge also is essential. Pennsylvania has only two kinds of poisonous snakes — the copperhead and the rattler — but there are other types that roam the woods. Learn to distinguish between them

before you embark on a trail. The chances of actually being bitten by a snake are very few (if you even see one), but it never hurts to know your enemy.

The best insurance from snakebites or attacks from any creature is your own attitude. Remember how David Carradine walked through those snakepits on "Kung-fu?" What got him out alive was his cautious reverence for the power of the animal (not to mention the prior training those snakes must've had!).

Tim Glick of the Pathfinder said, "People should understand that any animal will only attack if they're being threatened." People usually bring an attack upon themselves because they carelessly provoke the animal, he said.

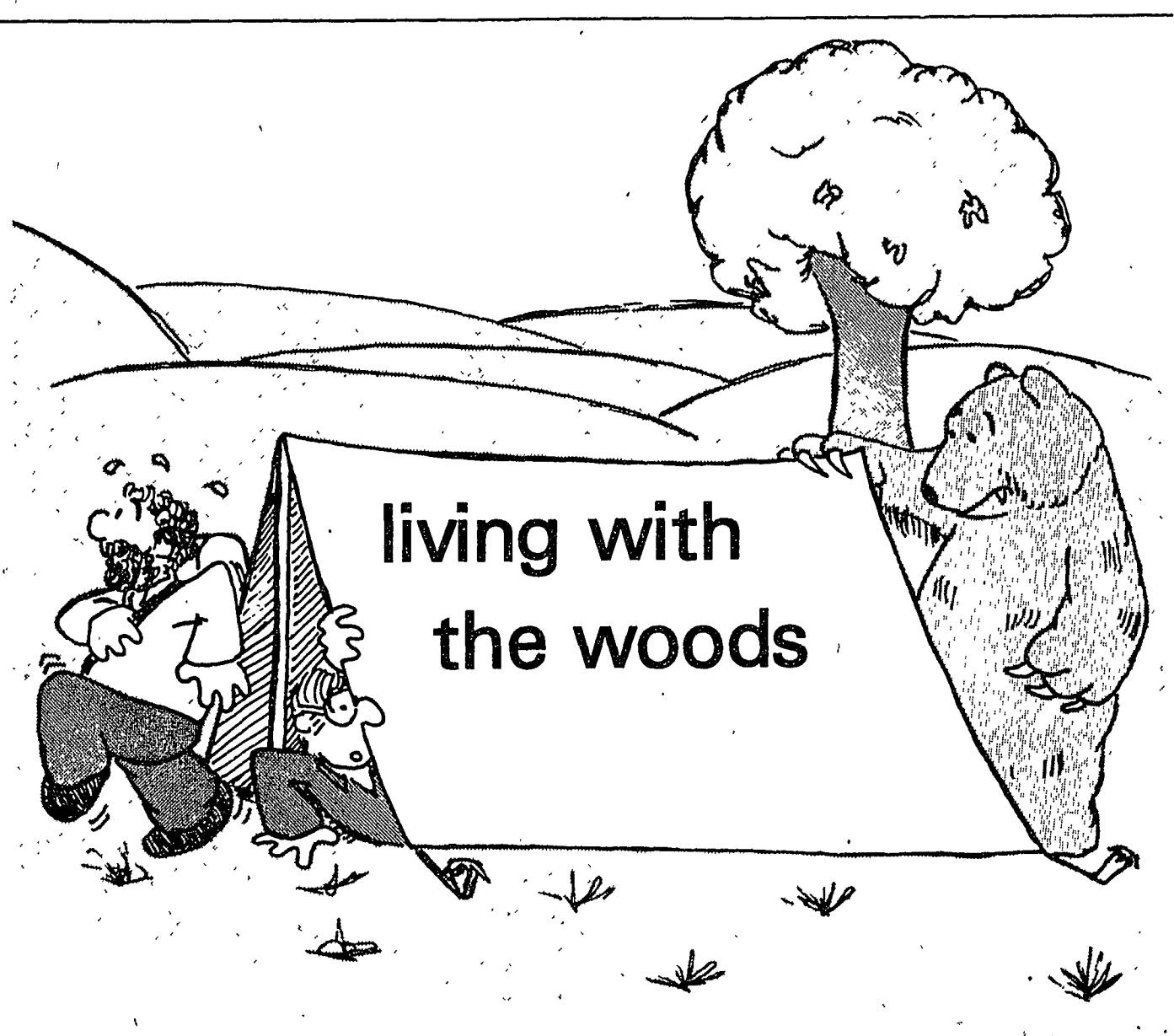
So be sure to walk softly and try not to disturb those "babes in the woods." Remember, it's their home, and you're the visitor. If you are welcomed by a set of bared fangs, you may have only yourself to blame.

However, if you think you might be in danger, take a trick from the animals themselves. Learn to "play possum." Just stop in your tracks and freeze. When you stop making noise, all the sounds around you become clearer. You'll hear if something else moves nearby, or if it's okay to very calmly continue.

I've avoided countless bee stings that way. Unfortunately, some of my fellow campers weren't so lucky. On two occasions, they were stung by swarms of angry bees because they panicked and ran instead of freezing and thinking (Yes, the bees were provoked by "attacks" on their homes). So don't disturb innocent-looking logs and hollow trees.

Use your sense and your head for safety in the woods. If you don't lose control, most situations won't become dangerous.

In honing your awareness, you'll suddenly discover a whole new world around you — the waterfall you never heard before, the creaking of trees bending to the wind, the sounds of the earth waking and sleeping — all the wonder and mystery that made you long to go there in the first place.



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