

Fires can spark at a moment's notice regardless of the season, so no matter where you are or what you're doing, be fire-ready and fire-safe. Following some basic guidelines with common sense is vital and could potentially be life-saving.

We are all aware that the number of bushfires causing devastation across Australia is increasing. Instead of entering into a political debate around *why*, this article focuses on *how* we as campers can be responsible with our campfires, and *how* we can also stay safe when heading into the bush.

*It's important to be aware of how to stay safe when it comes to fires. Image: Alite Designs*

## Always research the risks of the area before you leave

Some may see a campfire as an essential element of the outdoor experience, while others may regard them as unnecessary scarring of the landscape that has the potential to destroy the natural values of an area.

Firstly, learn the specific fire regions you are visiting, do not count on town or Shire Council names. Each state has its own fire services website and app with warnings and conditions presented by fire districts. Visit the relevant fire service and park sites for current advice before you leave home.

*It's essential to conduct research on the conditions before you leave.*

Don't forget to also check the [Bureau of Meteorology \(BOM\) website](#) for upcoming forecasts. Take note of the days either side of your visit as well, these can impact access and suitability to visit too.

Learn the conditions and familiarise yourself with Fire Danger Ratings. Stay informed and aware of your surroundings, and be prepared to act without an official warning. Download the relevant State or Territory app for bushfire alerts and enable notifications, however even if you think the fire conditions are low, check with the official sites and if there is a potential threat, stay informed through the ABC Local Radio broadcasts.

## Not all fire risks are obvious

Not all fire risks are obvious – don't forget your muffler will be hot after the drive. Avoid parking, or driving, through areas with tall grass that your muffler could set alight. Stay on made tracks.

Different States and Territories have different ways of declaring fire bans and varying jurisdictions that can impose them. A Total Fire Ban can be declared at any time, anywhere and usually includes park closures near the affected area, plus restrictions on the use of off-road vehicles. It's also worth checking whether Prescribed Burns are planned or in progress for an area you plan to visit. These are listed by the Parks and Wildlife service relevant to each area and the links at the end of this article may advise or direct you to the local or regional Parks office.

*Stay on the made tracks as your muffler will be hot after a drive.*

## Most importantly - you can always go another time or leave early

The most important practise you can uphold is if you have any concerns, stay home or leave early. Have a fire plan and share it with family and fellow travellers.

Heed the warnings and advice of the locals and authorities. You can always go another time, there is nothing relaxing about putting yourself in unnecessary danger.

On a practical level, the fewer vehicles in an area mean better access for firefighters.



*Make sure you only light a campfire in a cleared area.*

## Always pack to survive

When heading into the bush, be prepared. Check your survival kit includes a working battery-operated radio, torch and protective woollen clothing. If you don't have wool then something made from natural fibres that covers your arms and legs. Synthetics can melt and burn your skin. Keep the kit within easy reach inside your vehicle.

Pack a woollen blanket or fire safety blanket. Should you get caught in a fire, a blanket makes a great cover for you and your group. Use water sparingly to dampen cloths and put them over your face to limit smoke inhalation. Keep as much as you can to drink and avoid dehydration.

Know what to do if you are caught in a fire. The NSW Fire Service Fire Safety for Travellers brochure is a valuable resource wherever you are.



*Have the right tools on hand to manage your campfire. Image: Coleman*

## Campfire caution & responsible management - 14 point checklist

How do we indulge the human urge to sit around a fire at night whilst keeping mindful of our needs and responsible for our management?

Be it for warmth or cooking, if you wish to set a campfire here are some important points to remember...

1. No fires in Fire Ban season... no exceptions!
2. Obey all rules set out in the area you are camping... no exceptions.
3. Gas stoves can still cause fires, be responsible with how you use them.
4. Assess your needs and only create a campfire for warmth and/or cooking.
5. If available, use the provided fire pits. Making your own 'ring' from rocks, especially river rocks, is not a good idea as they have been known to explode from the heat.
6. Collecting firewood within many parks is prohibited. Leave dead wood where it lies as it's an important habitat for the local wildlife, *not* fire fuel. To avoid bringing pest species into the area, bring wood free from dirt and weeds.
7. Never leave a fire unattended. Gather enough wood and kindling before you light your fire. Ask someone else to get more if needed.



*Use the provided fire pits. Image: Coleman*

8. Keep fires small and manageable, with a clear radius of at least 3-metres around the fire (no bonfires).
9. Keep a shovel and container or jerry can of water nearby while you have a fire going. We have a dedicated collapsible bucket in our kit for extinguishing fires.
10. Beware of hot BBQ plates, coals, as well as flames, as on a windy day leaf litter can easily catch from any of these.
11. When you leave the site or head off to bed, use water or dirt (water is preferable) to extinguish the flames. Use a stick to move the logs, ash and coals around to make sure there aren't any hidden hot spots. Continue this process until the fire is cool.
12. Check the site and then recheck, you would be amazed how hot coals are well below the surface and it only takes a breeze to bring them to life. Use a non-combustible marker that clearly shows where the campfire has been. A cairn of rocks works well and may help to reduce the frequent incidence of third-degree burns experienced by the next campers arriving at the site.
13. Do not use campfires as rubbish incinerators – plastics release toxic gases when burnt. Fire pits are also not receptacles for broken glass or other bits and pieces. Keep them clean and tidy.
14. Lastly, but by no means least, maintain close supervision of children and pets. Every campfire should have a responsible, sober adult on hand in case of emergencies! Children's clothing may be flammable and ensuring they are familiar with the *stop, drop, cover and roll* drill may prevent a bad situation from becoming worse. Always have a fire blanket on hand, plus a first aid kit equipped for treating burns.



*Always obey the rules regarding campfires.*

## Simple but safe

Fire safety is not limited to setting a campfire. Knowing the conditions of your personal situation and being as prepared as possible is the responsibility of all campers and hikers. Follow the 14 point checklist for campfires and if there is a risk of bushfires, *don't go!* If you do get caught, remember that bushfires are unpredictable and in catastrophic conditions, they have the power to create their own weather pattern. Stay informed, be prepared, pack your survival kit and know how to use it.

**Regardless of how you are travelling or where you are, these are informative and handy links.**

- [Queensland Rural Fire Service](#)
- [NSW Rural Fire Service](#)
- [ACT Rural Fire Service](#)
- [Victoria's Country Fire Authority](#)
- [Emergency WA](#)
- [South Australian Country Fire Service](#)

- [NT Fire and Rescue Service](#)
- [Bureau of Meteorology weather warnings](#)
- [NSW Rural Fire Service Bushfire Safety for Travellers Guide](#)
- [ABC guide to planning for a Bushfire](#)
- [Geoscience Australia factsheet on Bushfires](#)
- [Bureau of Meteorology Fire Weather Knowledge Centre](#)

Special thanks to Jim Campbell for suggesting we update this post and for providing us with valuable input.

**What extra precautions do you take when camping to ensure you stay safe?**