

A Beginner's Guide to Group Car Camping in Ontario Provincial Parks

Car camping is the most beginner-friendly way to experience Ontario's outdoors. You drive right to your site, unload your gear, and you're set. With over 330 provincial parks offering everything from beaches to dense forests, there's a park for every kind of group.

Book Your Site Early

This is the most common mistake beginners make. Popular parks like Sandbanks, Algonquin, and Killbear fill up quickly — sometimes within days of reservations opening.

- Book at **ontarioparks.com**
- Summer reservations open in January
- Most sites run \$40-\$60+ per night depending on the park
- **Electrical sites** are worth considering if your group wants to charge devices or run a fan

Pick the Right Site Type

- **No hookup** - Fire pit, picnic table, and the basics
- **Electrical (15A or 30A)** - Good for charging devices or running small appliances
- **Roofed accommodations** - Cabins or yurts for those not ready for a tent

Weather Preparation

Ontario's weather can shift quickly. Always check the forecast and pack for multiple conditions.

- **Rain:** Ensure your tent has a rain fly. A tarp over the picnic table gives your group a dry communal space.
- **Heat:** Pack sunscreen, a hat, and plenty of water. Many sites have no shade, so a pop-up canopy is a worthwhile group investment.
- **Cold nights:** Even in July, temperatures can drop to 10°C after dark. Layer up before bed.

Activities

- **Hiking:** Trails exist for all fitness levels. Download a trail map before you lose cell service.
- **Swimming:** Many parks have lakes and beaches, but not all have lifeguards — always swim with a buddy.
- **Canoeing and kayaking:** Some parks offer rentals on-site, or bring your own.
- **Campfires:** Check for fire bans before you go. They're posted on the Ontario Parks website and at the park entrance.
- **Wildlife watching:** Loons, deer, turtles, and herons are common sightings. Binoculars are a nice bonus.
- **Stargazing:** Away from city lights, the night sky is impressive. A free star chart app on your phone works great.

The Real Campground Culprit: Raccoons

At most beginner-friendly Ontario parks, raccoons are a bigger concern than bears. They're bold, persistent, and very good at getting into unsecured food.

- Never leave food out unattended
- Store everything in your car or sealed containers when not in use
- Don't leave dirty dishes sitting out overnight
- Coolers are not raccoon-proof on their own — keep them in your car or secured at night
- Keep garbage sealed and use park bins when available

Bears are present in Ontario but are mostly a concern in northern parks. For beginners camping in southern and central Ontario, raccoons are the primary wildlife issue to manage.

Park Rules

Quiet hours are typically **11 PM to 7 AM**. Check-in is usually around 2 PM and checkout at 1 PM. Most parks have limited or no cell service, so download maps and park information before leaving home.

What to Pack

Each person should bring:

- Tent — a "4-person" tent realistically fits 2-3 people with gear
- Sleeping setup — a 3-season sleeping bag covers spring through fall; in summer heat, a couple of light blankets work fine and keep costs down for first-timers
- Sleeping pad or air mattress — the ground is harder and colder than expected
- Clothing in layers
- Biodegradable soap and basic toiletries
- Reusable water bottle
- Flashlight or headlamp with extra batteries
- Personal medications and first aid items

The group can share:

- Camp stove, fuel, pots, pans, and utensils
- Coolers with ice or ice packs
- Planned meals and group food
- Sealed food containers
- Biodegradable dish soap and sponges
- Garbage bags — pack out everything you bring in
- Tarp or pop-up canopy
- Group first aid kit
- Park maps and a compass or GPS
- Matches, lighter, or fire starters
- Camp chairs and a folding table
- Insect repellent and citronella candles
- Camp knife and small axe for firewood
- Water filter or purification tablets if using a natural water source

Leave No Trace

Pack out all garbage, avoid cutting live branches, and leave wildlife alone. Keeping campsites clean also reduces raccoon activity for your group and the campers who follow you.

Happy camping! ☐☐

Revision #6

Created 2023-04-04 20:21:26 UTC by Clinton

Updated 2026-02-21 08:59:22 UTC by Clinton