

Course Description

Alaska Backpacking

Features Of This Course:

- Route length: 90-150 miles
- Elevations of 3,000 to 7,000 feet
- Fishing: season and route dependent
- Non-technical peak ascents
- Minimum age: 16
- Travel through tundra, shrub thickets and gravel river bottoms
- Off-trail hiking, some animal and ATV trails
- Passes may involve travel on boulders and snow
- Excellent opportunities to see wildlife
- Brown bear territory
- Average group size: 14 students / 3 instructors

The Expedition

This course is a self-reliant expedition that hikes for 28 days in the remote mountains of either south central or interior Alaska. Typically, your route in the Talkeetna, Alaska, Chugach or Wrangell Mountains will start below treeline and head into the mountains along river valleys or up steep mountainsides. As you head further into the mountains the trees will disappear and you'll reach the open country known as tundra. The vistas here are typically consist of wide, tundra plains with a backdrop of rugged and heavily eroded mountains.

Few established trails exist after leaving the ATV (all terrain vehicle) trails near the roadhead. The seasonal migration tracks of the caribou often lead the hiker to the best route through the mountains. Alaskan mountains have fascinating ecosystems to observe and enjoy. The Talkeetnas contain the third largest caribou herd in Alaska. Dall sheep may be seen on the high ridges and moose can be spotted in the lower valleys where the vegetation is lush. More rarely seen, but also living here, are brown and black bear, wolves, wolverines and coyotes.

Many bird species, most of them summer migrants, can also be seen. The tundra itself has a surprisingly rich and varied flora. Both the wetter meadows and the higher, rockier terrain can have spectacular flower displays from mid-June to mid-August, and wild berries make a welcome addition to the backpacking diet on courses later in the season.

The first thing that you will notice upon your arrival in Alaska is the light. While you won't see the sun at midnight in the latitudes where we travel, it will stay light through the night during June and July. This offers unique opportunities for active, long days though your body may take a little while to adjust and learn to sleep when it is still light at 2 a.m.!

At first, hiking distances are usually, but not always, short to give you time to grow accustomed to your pack. To help ease the loads there will be two or three resupplies of food and fuel by bush plane during the month. Later hiking days will average between four and eight miles. Instructors conduct formal and informal classes on a wide range of subjects, beginning with basic wilderness living skills such as cooking, tent pitching, stove use, and Leave No Trace practices. Later instruction includes map reading, first aid, leadership, plant and animal identification, fishing (route dependent), ecosystems, geology, weather, and environmental issues. It is not uncommon to have two or more classes a day.

You'll be living with two or three other students in a "cook" group during the course. These small groups disperse the impact on the land and enable you to master the art of backcountry cooking and living. You'll get lots of coaching from your instructors while you learn these new skills. Before you know it, you'll be savoring homemade pizza and cinnamon rolls—gourmet delicacies that you made from scratch on a single-burner stove.

You'll also travel in small groups, usually of four to six. Initially, these groups will include an instructor, but later, once you gain more experience with map reading, route finding, and hazard evaluation, students often travel on their own. NOLS courses are designed for you to learn through experience. Your instructors are there to train, supervise, and provide feedback and advice, but ultimately the responsibility to learn lies with you.



Group dynamics and leadership are an integral part of our curriculum. You'll learn how to live and work closely with your course mates while you travel through the mountains. Having a tolerance for adversity and uncertainty, a willingness to work hard and the ability to maintain respect for other expedition members will be critical to success. As your group gains leadership skills and experience working together, you can expect your instructors to give you more responsibility for leading yourself and your peers.

A typical day might begin at 7:00 am. You will cook breakfast, break camp, pack, and then set off around 9:30 to hike the route you planned the night before. There are no typical hiking days, but expect to begin the course with short distances until people become accustomed to the terrain and the heavy packs. Elevation gain is as important a factor as linear distance and a 3-mile hike over a steep pass can be just as long as an 8-mile stretch on the level ground. Remember that you will be mostly hiking off trail on rough terrain. During the hiking day you will take short breaks and aim to arrive at a new camp by mid-afternoon. Usually you will not stop for a long lunch but snack as you go. The evenings are structured to give you some personal time and time to cook dinner. There may also be a class, a group meeting, readings or games. You will find cooking becomes a major focus in the day and the "kitchen" area tends to be the place for chatting and socializing. On some days you will not move camp and instructors will arrange various activities such as peak ascents, fishing parties, classes or natural history walks; they will also give you some down time to rest from the hard hiking you did on previous days.

Student Independence

On all NOLS courses students will be independent (unaccompanied by instructors) at various times. This will include time in and around camp such as while cooking or performing camp chores. Instructors may allow students to travel away from camp. Students often have independent unsupervised time, usually in town, before and after their course starts.

Independent Student Group Travel

An emphasis of this course is the development of skills that permit you to be self-sufficient in remote backcountry areas. Our teaching progression for accomplishing this is carefully planned and executed. Initially travel groups, usually of four to six students, will include an instructor who will teach travel skills and leadership. Gradually, as you gain proficiency, the instructor will allow you to take on more responsibility and make more of the decisions. If you demonstrate adequate skills competence, risk management and teamwork to your instructors, you may travel in student-led groups without instructors for a day at a time as you hike from camp to camp. We call this daily independent student travel and it is an effective educational tool. It allows you to practice travel skills and leadership and gives you responsibility for the outcome while still having indirect supervision by instructors and the benefit of the NOLS support systems.

This course may culminate in a Student Expedition. After successful practice with daily independent student travel and if your instructors think your group is ready, the instructors will help you divide into student expedition groups (usually four to six students each). With instructor oversight, each group will then select a leader and carefully plan and execute a multi-day independent student led expedition. This part of the course builds on the skills you've learned and practiced and allows you to travel without instructors for up to five days. Students are aware of where the instructors and the other student groups are planning to travel and camp. The instructors with emergency communication capability may be up to 24 hours away from the students. Our students often say the student expedition was the highlight of their course.

Although not common on Alaska Backpacking courses, fasting may be an optional part of the curriculum for the student expedition on this course. If the instructors think fasting is appropriate for the conditions and student abilities the students may chose to fast during the student expedition. Rations will be carried to allow students to eat in the event of an emergency.

Weather and Other Challenges

Given the latitude of these mountain ranges, cold and snowy conditions can occur any month of the year. You should expect highly variable weather that changes quickly from hot sunshine to rain or snow. Precipitation is very common here. It is not unusual to experience rain for more than half of your course.

Daily travel can be arduous. You will mostly hike off-trail and have to negotiate boulder fields, bogs, tussocks, dense willow thickets, rough river bars and steep slopes while carrying a pack weighing approximately 45% of your body weight. Rivers are frequent obstacles that you will learn to cross with minimum risk, but your feet and boots may be wet all day.



Bear avoidance techniques while camping and hiking will be integrated into your daily routine. Precautions against bear encounters will decrease the opportunities for solitude and privacy on this course. To minimize risk, group size in brown bear country is generally four persons. You will live, travel and take care of personal necessities always with a group of your peers nearby. This is one of the most challenging aspects of living in brown bear country. Other bear avoidance tactics include meticulously maintaining cleanliness at the cooking sites and making loud calls to warn bears of your presence when moving through areas where visibility is poor.

NOLS will provide the skills and knowledge you need for identifying and managing hazards, but a positive attitude is critical for ensuring the well being and success of the entire group. The consistent practice of risk management techniques and assumption of responsibility for yourself and other group members will help make your expedition to these wild mountains safe and enjoyable.

Many former students say that the biggest challenge on their course was learning to live and work in a team whose members have to co-exist so intimately, like in a family, for such a long period. When asked about the most rewarding aspect of the course most participants talk about the strong friendships that developed, the opportunity to work as a team and to accomplish the goals of the group. Students need to come with a willingness to work with people with different perspectives and backgrounds. The success of the expedition ultimately depends on people's willingness to support each other.

Personal Electronics

A key element to a NOLS education is time spent in wilderness. The benefits of this include being closer to nature, time away from society and civilization, and being in an environment where natural forces predominate and students have the opportunity to develop good judgment and practice self-reliance. For this reason, students are not permitted to take personal music players (iPods, MP3 players, CD players, etc.), cell phones, satellite tracking devices or satellite phones on NOLS courses. Instructors will be carrying sufficient communication equipment (usually a satellite phone and a ground-to-air or marine band radio) to handle any emergencies that may arise.

Fitness Recommendations

Almost continual daylight provides for long, busy days; your fitness goals should focus on being able to sustain a moderate level of exertion for hours on end rather than "quick sprint" fitness.

Focus on a well-rounded routine that emphasizes stamina, endurance, flexibility and strength. Finally, don't ignore the need for balance; this will serve you well in the moraine and boulder fields where the ability to quickly find your center of balance as you move from one step to the next will enable you to dance, rather than stumble your way through. For more information, please see the Physical Conditioning page of your enrollment packet.

Course Objectives

Each course is unique, due to variables such as route, group dynamics, fitness levels and environmental conditions. Working with these variables, it is our intent that each student accomplishes the following objectives:

Risk Management, Judgment and Decision-making

NOLS teaches wilderness users to practice responsible habits that promote the health and well being of self and others. Objectives include the ability to:

- Demonstrate knowledge of the hazards in this mountain environment e.g. bears, river crossings, rock fall and weather.
- Consistently perform appropriate techniques to reduce or avoid hazards.
- Demonstrate first aid skills necessary to support a patient until help arrives.
- Demonstrate the ability to develop an emergency contingency plan for a group in the outdoors.
- Display sound judgment and an awareness of self and group limits.



Leadership

At NOLS, we define leadership as “timely, appropriate actions that guide and support your group to set and achieve realistic goals. Great leaders create an environment that inspires individuals and groups to achieve their full potential.” On this course, the emphasis will be on gaining competence as a foundation for leading in the backcountry. We expect each student’s leadership ability to grow by accomplishing the following:

- Gain an understanding of the four types of leadership: self-leadership, active followership, designated leadership and peer leadership.
- Demonstrate a willingness to grow in each of NOLS’ seven leadership skills:
 1. Gain outdoor skills competence and thus be a better leader in the outdoors.
 2. Demonstrate positive expedition behavior, by serving the goals of the group.
 3. Tolerate adversity and uncertainty with a positive attitude.
 4. Actively cultivate your self-awareness as an outdoors person and a leader.
 5. Work to understand the leader’s vision and when appropriate develop your vision as a leader. Follow through with appropriate action to help the group achieve its potential.
 6. Improve your judgment and decision-making skills, learning the pros and cons of various decision-making styles on the continuum between directive and consensus.
 7. Practice effective communication skills from active listening to public speaking.
- Gain understanding of your own signature style of leadership.

Outdoor Skills

At NOLS, our students learn to live and travel in the wilderness within a framework of personal health and care of the environment. Objectives include the ability to:

- Dress appropriately for a variety of conditions; be punctual and organized.
- Cook nutritious meals using a camp stove or fire.
- Demonstrate appropriate campsite selection and shelter set-up.
- Travel efficiently in mountainous terrain using map and/or compass skills.
- Utilize off-trail navigation and route-finding techniques to mitigate hazards.
- Employ sound bear camping and travel techniques.
- Demonstrate a thorough understanding of different river crossing techniques.
- Take responsibility for the care and organization of personal and group equipment.

Environmental Studies

An integral part of every course is to raise students' awareness of their influence on ecosystems and their relationship with the world and others. Objectives include the ability to:

- Consistently perform sound minimum-impact living and travel skills by following Leave No Trace principles; be able to extrapolate the knowledge to new environments.
- Show an understanding, appreciation and respect for the natural world; know characteristic flora and fauna of the area.
- Develop basic natural history observation and interpretive skills.
- Demonstrate basic knowledge and respect for local and regional native cultures.
- Discuss the history of and potential solutions to pertinent environmental problems.
- Demonstrate knowledge of public land management and discuss means to be involved in issues of interest.
- Strive to integrate wilderness practices and ethics into daily personal and professional life.

Transfer of College Credit

NOLS cannot guarantee that credits from courses are transferable. Transfer of credits is at the discretion of the receiving school and depends on the comparability of curricula and accreditation.

