

Course Description

Alaska Outdoor Educator - Backpacking & Sea Kayaking

Features Of This Course:

- Minimum age: 18
- Average group size: 12 students / 3 instructors
- Two field sections: backpacking and sea kayaking
- 30 days with approximately 14 field days on each section

The Expedition

If you're an aspiring or current outdoor educator, you know that learning to lead groups in two different skill areas is a professional advantage. This all-in-one course will do that, giving you the chance to learn how to lead on land and sea. Your classroom for the sea kayaking section is Prince William Sound, with its plentiful wildlife and booming tidewater glaciers. Your route will take you into a fishing village—either Whittier or Valdez—and then out onto the Sound. Along the way, you'll learn how to glide along the coast in a sea kayak and have a chance to practice your teaching skills in some of the most beautiful parts of the Sound. For the backpacking portion of the course, you'll be in either the Wrangell, Chugach, Alaska or Talkeetna Mountains, home to Dall sheep, grizzly and black bears, moose and caribou. In this land of tundra and rocky passes, you'll learn things like risk management, outdoor skills, leadership, expedition planning and outdoor teaching techniques. By the end of this expedition, you'll be better equipped to teach, lead and explore, whether in a boat or on foot. To maximize your learning the backpacking sections will focus on lightweight techniques. On the kayaking section you will be able to bring a few extra items of comfort, and focus more on the art of outdoor cooking.

Features of the Backpacking Section

- Backpacking route 40-80 miles
- Elevations of 3,000 to 7,000 feet
- Potential for non-technical peak ascents
- 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
- Opportunities to see wildlife
- Brown bear territory

Your route usually starts below treeline and heads into the mountains along glaciated 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 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 road head. At first, hiking distances will be short to give you time to grow accustomed to your pack. To help ease the loads the hiking section will focus on simplicity and lightweight techniques. You will be asked to leave behind items of comfort and luxury, and have a simpler cooking set-up compared to sea kayaking. The seasonal migration tracks of the caribou often lead the hiker to the best route through the mountains. These mountains have fascinating ecosystems to observe and enjoy. Dall sheep may be seen on high ridges, caribou on the tundra and moose can be spotted in the lower valleys where 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'll 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. The evenings are particularly beautiful and are excellent times to enjoy the beauty of Alaska and to explore the natural history around your camp.



Features of the Sea Kayaking Section

- Paddling route 75-120 miles
- Opportunity for day hikes
- Fishing (season-dependent) for salmon, rockfish, halibut
- Travel in both single and double kayaks
- Travel near tidal glaciers possible
- Chance of rain throughout the course

Prince William Sound is the classroom for the sea kayaking section. This area offers a spectacular and varied natural history; it is a place for observation, exploration and discovery. The variety of the landscape is compelling. You'll paddle a sea kayak near towering glaciers and past wooded coves. The sea teems with various forms of life including whales, porpoises, sea otters, seals and sea lions. Sea birds wheel in the sky overhead while tidal pools with starfish, anemones and other small creatures dot the shorelines. You'll work hard paddling with all your gear for the expedition stowed in your boat, but you'll play hard as well. Ultimately, you will learn skills you need to paddle in a protected ocean environment.

What You'll Learn

The goal of this course is to provide the experience and instruction to create responsible, competent Outdoor Educators. Such individuals are capable of leading novices in the backcountry, managing risk, and teaching the relevant skills, information and attitudes using a variety of experiential teaching techniques. On the course you'll first develop solid basic skills that are the foundations for backpacking in any mountain environment—camping, cooking, map reading, stove use, Leave No Trace techniques, bear camping practices and sanitation.

With these mastered, you'll move into route finding, river crossings, outdoor leadership, expedition behavior and the natural history of the area. Sharing of knowledge between fellow expedition members is important, and students will be expected to teach classes or lead discussions on subjects related to the course. This will provide a forum for developing/discussing different teaching styles and techniques. We carry resource material on the expedition so individuals can prepare presentations in the field. The opportunity for student-led discussions and classes will depend on many variables. Group travel rate and weather certainly are big factors but the intent is to help students round out their skills through daily practice and experience.

During your course you'll live with two or three other students in a “cook” group. These small groups help you disperse the impact on the land and will enable you to learn the art of backcountry cooking and living. You'll also travel in small groups, usually of four to six. Initially these groups will include an instructor, but later in the course—once you know the intricacies of map reading, route finding, and hazard evaluation—students might hike on their own.

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 or between sections.

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 the necessary competencies in risk management, outdoor skills and teamwork to the 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.

The dual-skill nature of this course makes it very unlikely that there will be time for multi-day independent student group travel on either section. If a Student Expedition were to take place, it would be only after successful practice with daily independent student travel. Your instructors would help you divide into student expedition groups (usually four to six students each), select a leader and carefully plan and execute an overnight independent student-led expedition. Students would be aware of where the instructors and the other student groups were planning to travel and camp.



The instructors with emergency communication capability might be up to 24 hours away from the students.

In-Town Classes

We make a special effort to offer classes providing an insider's view of how we pursue our mission and goals. In-town classes cover topics such as outfitting and rationing. We'll also cover administration topics and give an overview of outdoor careers.

Weather and Other Challenges

Given the latitude of these mountain ranges and ocean environment, cold, rainy and snowy conditions (mountains) can occur any month of the year. You should expect highly variable weather that changes quickly. Precipitation is very common. It is not unusual for it to rain for more than half of your course.

Daily travel can be difficult. You'll 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. On the ocean, storms can prohibit paddling for a few days.

Bear avoidance techniques while camping and hiking will be integrated into your daily routine. Precautions against bear encounters will decrease 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 health, 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. This expedition is designed for both practicing and potential outdoor educators. The diversity of programs within the field of outdoor education combined with the different experience levels of individuals on these courses can provide both challenges and opportunities for each group. Expect to have some group members who are either much less or much more experienced than you. This diversity enables members of the expedition to take on a variety of student and teacher roles and provides for a broad base of stories, ideas and perspectives.

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 Alaska 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. Walking for a few hours on uneven terrain with a light to moderate backpack is a simple way to prepare.

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 in that variables such as route, group dynamics, fitness levels and environmental conditions are factors. Working with these variables, it is our intent to accomplish the following objectives:

Risk Management, Judgment and Decision-making

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

- Demonstrate knowledge of the dangers in a cold-water environment.
- Demonstrate knowledge of the hazards in this mountain environment e.g. bears, river crossings, rock fall, and weather.
- Describe and consistently perform specific techniques to negotiate or avoid hazards.
- Formulate and put into effect an emergency plan for a group in the outdoors.
- Learn and apply basic first aid skills appropriate to this environment.
- Display an awareness of weather and sea conditions appropriate for safe travel.
- Use experience and judgment to implement sound decisions and follow them through to completion.

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

Students are expected to live, travel and educate others in the outdoors within a framework of personal health and care of the environment. Objectives include the ability to:

- Live comfortably in a wilderness environment, camp, cook and dress for a variety of conditions.
- Travel competently in wilderness terrain using off-trail navigation, hazard evaluation, and river-crossing techniques.
- Employ sound bear camping techniques.
- Accurately assess skills, strengths and endurance in self and others and conservatively apply those limits to given situations.

Environmental Studies

An integral part of every NOLS course is to raise each student's awareness of his or her impact on the natural world. Objectives include the ability to:

- Consistently perform sound minimum-impact living and travel skills by following the Leave No Trace principles in two different environments and be able to extrapolate this knowledge to new environments:
- Develop basic natural history observation and interpretive skills.
- Continually foster an understanding and respect for the natural world.
- Be able to discuss problems and potential solutions of specific environmental issues.
- Demonstrate and cultivate knowledge and respect for local cultures.
- Reflect on their role, impact and contributions on planet earth.



Sea Kayaking and Backpacking Skills

The necessary skills for responsible travel are taught throughout the course. The teaching progression is dependent on students' abilities and the weather conditions experienced on each particular course. Objectives include the ability to demonstrate an understanding of the following:

- Safe launchings and landings in various conditions.
- Basic paddling strokes; forward, reverse, sweep, draw, low and high braces.
- Basic self and assisted rescues.
- Coastal hazards; wind, waves, weather, currents, tides and geography of the coastline.
- Responsible group travel and use of safety equipment.
- 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.

Wilderness Education Skills

This course helps students to develop as wilderness educators and leaders. Objectives include the ability to:

- Consistently role model basic outdoor living skills; understand how environmental factors influence learning.
- Reflect on personal teaching style and philosophy through critique and discussion.
- Demonstrate self-direction in the pursuit of learning opportunities.
- Teach a class or make a presentation to the group; teach others when opportunity arises on the course.

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.

