

Course Description

Brooks Range Backpacking & River

Features Of This Course:

- Combination of hiking and river travel
- Class I and II whitewater
- Sport fishing
- 20 or more hours of daylight
- Bear camping and avoidance practices
- Remote travel above the Arctic Circle
- Hiking route of approximately 50 miles in 10 days
- Paddling route of approximately 400 miles in 25 days
- Bush plane access
- Elevations from sea level to 9,000 feet
- Some layover days and day hikes
- Minimum age 18
- Average age 22
- Average group size 8 students / 2 instructors

The Expedition

Alaska's Brooks Range—the classroom for this expedition—is one of the wildest mountain ranges in North America. Stretched across the tundra north of the Arctic Circle, the range is defined by big open river bottoms, steep mountain slopes, dense willow thickets and lots of wildlife. Much of the landscape lies above tree line and elevations range from sea level to over 9,000 feet. The mountains are spectacular and rugged, and rivers flow through wilderness for hundreds of miles. It's possible for you to see Dall sheep, moose, caribou, wolves, wolverines, black and grizzly bear, and lynx as you travel.

For more than a month, this will be your home. You'll learn how to backpack through these rugged mountains and you'll learn how to paddle a canoe on the Noatak River in Gates of the Arctic National Park. Remote, entirely above the Arctic Circle, and accessible only by charter air taxi, this wilderness river receives little recreational use. You'll work hard traveling down the river and backpacking in the mountains, but you'll play hard as well. And you'll learn the skills you need to paddle down rivers or backpack up mountains on your own, long after the end of your course.

These skills begin with the basics—camping, cooking, map reading, stove use, Leave No Trace techniques, sanitation, navigation, bear avoidance, expedition behavior and leadership which are the foundation for backcountry travel. As the course progresses, more advanced instruction will include map reading, first aid, plant and animal identification, fishing, natural history, geology, weather and environmental issues. Expect to learn about a landscape shaped by Arctic influences, still largely untouched by humanity.

At the end of the hiking section, you'll exchange a backpack for a folding canoe, and learn the techniques and skills necessary to travel responsibly down wilderness rivers. The Noatak River includes stretches of moderate whitewater rated Class I and II. Layover days will allow time for additional classes, exploration, fishing and photography.

During your course, you'll live with two or three other students in a “cook” group. These small groups help you disperse your impact on the land and enable you to master the art of backcountry cooking and living. Travel days will be interspersed with rest days, providing time for exploration and wildlife observation.

Those interested in fishing may have an opportunity to catch grayling or Arctic char.

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 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 paddle 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 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 three days. Students are aware of where the instructors and the other student groups are planning to travel and camp. Each Student Expedition group will carry an emergency communication device that will allow students to initiate an emergency response in the event of a serious emergency. In most cases students will have a personal locator beacon, but in some situations they will have a satellite phone, cell phone, radio or possibly another type of device. The instructors with a satellite phone, or additional 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.

Weather and Other Challenges

Summers above the Arctic Circle can defy everything you've ever assumed about "summer." The weather is as likely to be wet and cold as it is to be fair and pleasantly warm. Storms are not uncommon, for days at a time, and it can snow any time of the year. Poor weather may ground aircraft for several days, delaying access to and from this remote backcountry and perhaps jeopardizing scheduled travel plans.

Travel in the mountains can be tough. You'll hike cross-country with a heavy pack through a rugged but incomparable wilderness. You'll traverse steep slopes of snow, loose rock and tundra, and grunt up mountain passes. On the river, you'll be exposed to the dangers of paddling in moving water, avoiding rocks and sweepers (trees or branches reaching out in the waterway). Camping will involve dealing with swarms of mosquitoes. You'll practice bear camping techniques, which can mean having very little time to yourself, for this is grizzly country. You'll be miles from the amenities of civilization. Telephones, ambulances, and hospitals may be several days away.

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 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.

Identifying and managing mountain and river hazards will be a constant theme in our instruction. Managing risks and assuming responsibility for yourself and your colleagues will help make your expedition in these wild and beautiful mountains healthy and fun.

One challenge that is difficult to explain, but is perhaps the most important to the experience, is the challenge of living, working and learning with the same people day in and day out. Expedition behavior, or the ability to get along with the other members of the group and function as a team, is a vital component of the NOLS curriculum and the course experience.

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. NOLS does not permit students to use personal cell or satellite phones or other communication devices including personal tracking devices (e.g. SPOT), while in the field.



Additionally, students are not permitted to take personal music players (iPods, MP3 players, CD players, etc). Instructors will be carrying sufficient communication equipment (usually a satellite phone) to handle any emergencies that may arise.

Special Considerations

Please be aware that chronic knee, ankle and wrist ailments have been a source of problems in the past for some students. Opportunities for evacuation in this remote area are severely limited and may not be readily available. If you have a history of such problems, please contact us for an evaluation.

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 to accomplish the following outcomes.

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. Each student is expected to:

- Demonstrate knowledge of the hazards in an arctic environment, e.g., rockfall, weather, river crossings, etc.
- 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 a contingency plan for a group in the outdoors
- Display sound judgment and an awareness of group and self-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. Each student is expected 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 the arctic using map and compass skills
- Utilize off-trail navigation and route-finding techniques to mitigate hazards

Environmental Studies

Students develop an awareness of how to apply minimum-impact ideas to their lives beyond the course. Each student is expected to:

- Consistently perform sound minimum-impact living and travel skills by following Leave No Trace principles; be able to extrapolate the knowledge to varied settings;
- Show an understanding, appreciation, and respect for the natural world; know characteristic flora and fauna of the area
- 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

River Canoeing Skills

The necessary skills for responsible travel by canoe are taught throughout the course. The teaching progression is dependent on students' abilities and the river conditions experienced on each particular course. Each student is expected to demonstrate an understanding of the following:

- Paddle signals
- Basic paddling strokes: forward, reverse, sweep, draw and pry, eddy turns, peel-outs, and ferries
- Basic river rescue techniques
- River hazards: rapids, rocks, sweepers
- Responsible group travel and use of safety equipment
- River hydrology and navigation

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.

