

# Course Description

## Semester In Alaska

### Features Of This Course:

- Travel through tundra, shrub thickets and gravel river bottoms
- Off-trail hiking, some animal and ATV trails
- Sea kayaking in Prince William Sound
- Mountaineering on alpine glaciers
- Opportunities for snow and ice climbing
- Roped glacier travel
- Abundant wildlife
- Fishing may be possible
- Major river crossings
- Peak ascents
- Course length: 75 day
- Minimum age: 17
- Average age: 20
- Average group size: 12 students / 3-4 instructors

### The Expedition

A semester spent in the outdoors entails two and a half months camping out, exploring Alaska, developing skills, meeting people, pushing yourself, and having fun. A NOLS semester in Alaska will take you from high peaks to beautiful wooded shorelines along the coast. You may find yourself counting caribou as a herd trails by your tent, or paddling past pods of Orca in a sea kayak. You'll watch the rain from leaden skies and read by the light of a near perpetual sun. You'll work hard hiking and paddling with all your gear on your back or in your kayak but you'll play hard too. These semesters are action-packed, learning adventures that leave you with the skills and experience to travel in the wilderness long after the end of your course.

To ensure that your semester provides you with the skills you want to learn, there are three sections: backpacking, mountaineering and sea kayaking. Most of your instructors will change as the sections change so that you get the most qualified leadership we can offer. One instructor may stay with the course for its duration. The specific order of the three sections varies according to each semester. On some semesters you will return to the NOLS Alaska headquarters to outfit and prepare for the next section. On others, the transitions occur in the field with the backpacking sections and mountaineering sections being combined.

While you are in the field, you will live with two or three other students in a "cook" group. These small groups help you disperse the impact on the land and enable you to master the art of backcountry cooking and living. You will also travel in small groups, usually of four to six. Initially, these groups will include an instructor, but later in your course—once you know the intricacies of map-reading, route finding, and hazard evaluation—students often travel on their own. The field segment of each section will end with course evaluations.

### 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 of semesters.

### 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.

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 four 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.

Although not common on NOLS Alaska 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 choose 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**

Summer weather in Alaska is variable. During the course of your semester, you'll go from intense heat to biting cold. You'll learn to live comfortably outside, in blizzards, rainstorms and sunshine.

Travel in the mountains and oceans can be tough. Often you'll be off-trail bushwhacking through thick vegetation or scrambling over tricky terrain. Rivers can be hard or impossible to cross. You will traverse steep slopes of loose rock, snow or grass, and cross high-mountain passes. Long periods sitting in the cockpit of a sea kayak can be uncomfortable. But the hard work is worth it. There's nothing quite like taking your pack off at the top of a pass and looking down at miles of new country opening up before you or arriving at a beautiful camping beach after a long day in a kayak.

Throughout your course, you'll be miles from the amenities of civilization. Telephones, ambulances and hospitals may be several days away. These hazards and challenges are not meant to intimidate you, but they are the reality of living and traveling in the wilderness. Identifying and managing hazards—whether we're talking about falling rock, stormy weather, animals, moving water or steep terrain—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 places healthy and fun.

When asked what was the most challenging part of their semester, students often refer to individual personality conflicts and living with the same group of people for 75 days. 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. Just as you need to be physically fit you also need to be mentally ready to take on the challenges of a semester in Alaska. Recognizing that everyone has different strengths and weaknesses is also an important aspect of being on an expedition. For some people carrying a heavy backpack might be very demanding, while a 20-mile long day fighting a head wind with driving rain in a kayak presents little challenge. Often physical abilities are less important than the ability to be a caring and considerate group member. There will be days when you will help to care for a sick tent mate and other days when you will need a hand to overcome some hurdles. A positive attitude will help you, and the group, have the best semester ever.

### **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.



### **Sea Kayaking Section Features:**

- Paddling route: 100-200 miles
- Possibility of many rainy days
- Travel near tidewater glaciers possible
- Travel in both single and double kayaks
- Fishing possible
- Abundant wildlife
- Opportunities for day hikes

### **Sea Kayaking in Prince William Sound**

Prince William Sound offers spectacular and varied natural history; it is a place for observation, exploration and discovery. The variety of the landscape is compelling. For 23 days, you will paddle a sea kayak beneath towering glaciers and past wooded coves. The sea teems with life—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.

Throughout the semester, instructors hold both formal and informal classes on a wide range of subjects. If this is your first section, the early classes will emphasize basic outdoor living skills such as cooking, staying warm and dry, fire building, conservation, judgment, and living and working as a team. As the course progresses and you become more comfortable in the new environment, your instructors' emphasis will shift to paddling techniques, rescues, ocean hazard evaluation, and fishing. Do not be surprised to find yourself sitting in a class about local geology, tides, rain forest botany or sea mammals, or participating in a discussion on different leadership styles and expedition behavior. The balance between classes and activities will depend on the group's interest.

Our instructors encourage each participant to take an active role in learning. This means that you might research a topic with course materials and later present it to the group, or that you are actively involved in the decision making process and planning of the next day's move. At certain times the course will travel together; at other times we split up and travel and camp in smaller "pods." You will learn how to manage the risks of sea kayaking and how to become a confident camper in a coastal environment.

Your kayaking route will include a mixture of fjord travel, open sea crossings, and island hopping. Most courses travel to at least one tidewater glacier. The islands and mainland contain beautiful lush rain forest and bog vegetation—the result of lots of rain. Overcast and cool days are the norm for summer in this maritime climate. You can expect it to rain or drizzle for at least half of the section. Storms (with winds up to 40 miles per hour) can prohibit paddling and strand the course at a beach for a few days.

Your most valuable lesson may be how to camp comfortably in soaking wet weather. There are times when you will be wet, tired and cold, but you will learn to handle these situations, and maybe even smile as you do.

### **Backpacking Section Features:**

- Route length: 90-115 miles
- Elevations of 3,000 to 7,000 feet
- Fishing: season and route dependent
- 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
- Excellent opportunities to see wildlife
- Brown bear territory

### **Backpacking in the Talkeetna, Chugach, Alaska or Wrangell Mountains**

The Talkeetna and Chugach Mountains are located northeast of Anchorage. The Alaska Range lies in the interior of Alaska and is the location of some of North America's highest mountains. The Wrangell Mountains straddle the US-Canada border. Your backpacking section will occur in one of these spectacular mountain ranges. There are few trails or roads in these mountains and they are very rugged. Because these mountain ranges receive their fair share of Alaskan rain, they offer a lush tundra environment to explore.



The course will travel slowly for the first few days of the section to give everyone a chance to get accustomed to the packs and terrain. The packs will be heavy, particularly at first. To help ease loads, there will be two resupplies of food and fuel via airplane.

Your route will start below treeline and head into the mountains along the glaciated river valleys. As you head further into the mountains the trees are left behind and you 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 roadhead. The seasonal migration tracks of the caribou often lead the hiker to the best route through the mountains. The Talkeetna and Alaska Mountain Ranges 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 bears, 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 later in the season wild berries make a welcome addition to the backpacking diet. These mountains are famous for their complex geology, beautiful cliff colors, strange rock formations and their glacial features. The rock is generally unstable, so you should not expect to rock climb, but there are opportunities for non-technical peak ascents.

Only some of the streams and lakes offer good fishing, but course routes can encompass these areas. You may have the chance to learn how to fly-fish for Dolly Varden trout or Arctic grayling.

Other classes covered include flora and fauna identification, hiking techniques, tundra camping techniques (emphasizing bear camping), and river crossings. This section often provides opportunities for you to work on your leadership skills and, with the instructors' help, teach topics of interest to the group.

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 section. 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 with poor visibility.

On some semesters the backpacking and glacier sections are combined into one longer expedition. In this format, the course will return to the NOLS Alaska headquarters or change equipment in a coastal town between the combination backpacking/glacier section and the sea kayaking section. At the end of the course we will return to the headquarters. Course routes are finalized just prior to the start of the semester.

#### **Glacier Mountaineering Section Features:**

- Snow and ice mountaineering skills development
- Living on glaciers for 60-90% of the course
- Potential for severe weather
- Introduction to avalanche safety skills
- Introduction to snow camping techniques
- Route length: 50-120 miles
- Travel by ski, snowshoe or foot
- Living and traveling in close quarters
- Exposure to glacier travel and crevasse rescue techniques
- Average group size: 12 students/3 instructors

#### **Mountaineering in the Alaska, Chugach or Wrangell Mountains**

This section is taught in one of three locations—the Alaska, Chugach or Wrangell Mountains. These areas offer superb ice and snow climbing and are ideally suited for teaching basic mountaineering skills.



Most of the mountaineering section is spent on glaciers and snow where subfreezing temperatures can be expected even in the summer. You will learn and utilize glacier travel techniques, snow camping, hazard evaluation, and route finding. The distances covered daily will be short at first to give everyone a chance to get used to the heavy packs and roped travel. There will be some days of no travel to allow time for classes and practice climbing. As the course progresses and we move farther into the range, we will hike longer distances en route to a "high camp" from which to base possible peak ascents.

Climbing classes will range from basics such as belaying, anchors, rope systems and crevasse rescue to more advanced subjects such as French and American techniques on ice, snow climbing, and running belays. There is little to no rock climbing because the rock is not stable enough.

### **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 such variables, it is our intent to have each student accomplish the following:

#### **Risk Management, Judgment and Decision-making**

NOLS teaches the wilderness user 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 the varied environments in which the semester is conducted and be able to transfer/apply this experience to new environments.
- Consistently perform specific techniques to reduce or avoid hazards.
- Create and show the ability to implement emergency plans for groups in the outdoors.
- Anticipate, prevent, evaluate, and care for medical problems in wilderness settings.
- Gain sufficient experience with equipment, the wilderness environment, expedition members' and one's own limits to develop the judgment and decision making skills necessary to be a capable expedition member and wilderness traveler.

#### **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, students learn to live and travel in the outdoors within a framework of personal health and care of the environment. Objectives include the ability to:

- Live proficiently in all course environments — learning to camp, cook and dress for a variety of conditions with an awareness of minimum impact concerns.
- Travel competently in the course terrain using off-trail navigation, hazard evaluation and terrain specific travel techniques.
- Take responsibility for the care and organization of personal and group equipment.
- Exhibit good personal hygiene in diverse settings and situations.

## **Environmental Studies**

An integral part of every semester 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 the Leave No Trace principles; be able to extrapolate this knowledge to new environments.
- Develop basic natural history observation, and interpretive skills, in a variety of ecosystems.
- Learn effective use of appropriate field references to facilitate self-teaching.
- Understand the history of, and consider potential solutions to, pertinent environmental issues.
- Learn and apply fundamentals of basic field natural history including geology, glaciology, ecology, ornithology, mammalogy, botany, meteorology and oceanography.
- Understand the functions and local concerns of state and federal land management agencies.
- Understand the roles and local concerns of competing interest groups (tourists, hunters, miners).
- Demonstrate a basic knowledge and respect for local and regional native cultures.
- Facilitate the transference of wilderness ethics and practices 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.

