

Course Description

Absaroka Backpacking

Features Of This Course:

- Hiking route: ~ 90 miles
- Elevations of 9,000' - 12,000'
- Area borders Yellowstone National Park
- Average age: 19
- Minimum Age: 16
- Course length: 30 days
- Average group size: 15 students / 3 instructors
- On and off-trail hiking
- Grizzly bear territory
- Excellent wildlife and natural history
- Average Pack Weight: 40-50 pounds

The Expedition

The Absaroka Mountain Range is famous for its sweeping forested mountains, unique geology, and diverse wildlife. For 28 days, you'll travel through lush valleys surrounded by sheer cliffs of crumbly volcanic breccia. You'll camp under towering conifers and hike across high alpine plateaus where the tallest plants are only a few inches high. The Absarokas are home to deer, bighorn sheep, elk, moose, grizzly bear, coyote, and now, the gray wolf.

This course is a classic mountain expedition. Some of your days will be spent hiking over steep, rocky terrain and high alpine plateaus where the view stretches in every direction for nearly 100 miles. Other days will find you traveling through meadows blanketed in wildflowers. You'll cross rivers, scramble over boulders, and hike both on and off trail. Plant and wildlife identification and fly-fishing techniques are only some of the topics you'll study. Peak ascents offer up stunning views of snow-covered mountains stretching from the Tetons to Yellowstone National Park to the Wind River Range. You'll camp where elk roam and sparkling mountain streams tumble down surrounding craggy peaks. This magical environment is one of the most pristine areas left in the lower 48 states. Long after your course ends you will be using the skills you learned while exploring the Absarokas in your travels all over the world.

We start slowly on our courses to allow you to get used to the weight of your pack, the fit of your boots, and the elevation. Initially, we'll focus on basic camping skills: cooking, stove use, bear camping techniques, map reading, and *Leave No Trace* practices. Eventually, we will move into more advanced topics such as first aid, fly-fishing, expedition behavior, and leadership.

In the backcountry, you will live and cook with two or three other students in a cook/ tent group. These small groups help disperse our 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 in your course - once you know the intricacies of map reading, route finding, and hazard evaluation - you may travel on your own. NOLS courses are designed for you to learn through experience. Your instructors are there to train, supervise, and provide feedback and advice. Ultimately, however, what you learn depends on what you practice.

NOLS takes great pride in providing quality experiential education on all courses. Expeditions, unlike traditional classrooms, are influenced by weather, terrain, and the characteristics of the individuals involved. Accordingly, NOLS courses are not fully scripted and this quality is the key ingredient in experiential education. Given the variables that affect all NOLS courses, the depth of topic coverage will vary from course to course.



Wilderness courses often hike three out of every four days. Hiking days begin early when you light your stove, cook and enjoy breakfast, and then pack for the day. You're usually hiking by mid-morning. Lunch on the trail might be bread you baked the day before, summer sausage or a trail mix of nuts and dried fruits. You may stop for a short class on natural history or to learn how to cross a river, travel over boulders or snow, or traverse a high pass. When you arrive at your new camp location, you'll first spend time choosing a Leave No Trace site, organizing camp, then preparing and enjoying dinner. If the hike was long, a short evening meeting may wrap up the day. If the hike was short, a class or discussion may be on the agenda.

The difficulty of any given day is hard to predict. Long miles on trail may be physically easier than high mountain passes or a day hiking through boulders and fallen timber in a wilderness without trails. Your pack may be lighter than usual as you approach a food re-supply day, or you may be carrying extra gear to lighten the load of a course mate who is not feeling well. The wilderness has a knack for finding challenges for all.

You'll occasionally have a layover day to rest, enjoy a beautiful location, have classes, or climb a peak. After breakfast and organizing camp, there might be a meeting, a wildlife search, or a fishing expedition. Lunch may be something you cook—layover days are great times to bake for the next day's travel. The evening plan may include a class, a discussion, or an organizational meeting.

Expedition behavior and leadership will be an important part of the course curriculum. You'll learn how to live and work closely with your course mates while you travel through the mountains. Bring a tolerance for adversity and uncertainty, respect for other members, and a willingness to work. 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.

You can expect ongoing verbal coaching and feedback throughout the expedition, with written performance summaries at course end.

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 in small groups without them. Students often have independent unsupervised time, usually in town, before and after their course.

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 teaches travel skills and leadership throughout the hiking day. Gradually, as you gain proficiency, the instructor will allow you to take on more responsibility and make more decisions. When you have demonstrated the necessary competency 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 find that it is an effective educational tool. Such independence 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. This part of the course builds on the skills you've learned and practiced and allows you to travel without instructors. Our students often say the student expedition was the highlight of their course, and it is a goal for many of our trips. If your group is able to demonstrate proficiency and competency in camping skills and risk management, your group is ready after successful practice with daily independent student travel, they will help you divide into student expedition groups (usually three to six students each) and assist each group as it selects a leader and plans a multi-day expedition. Part of the planning involves mapping out where the various groups, including the instructors, plan to travel and camp throughout their expedition. The instructors with emergency communication capability may be up to 24 hours away from the students at any given time. Due to the unpredictability of weather, group dynamics, terrain and illness/injury, the Student Expedition may not happen on all NOLS courses.

Fasting is an optional part of the curriculum for the Student Expedition (or optional solo, if applicable) 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

Mountain weather is capricious. On any given day, temperatures may range from below freezing to sweltering. Afternoon thunderstorms are common and can be violent. You may experience snow, hail, and rain, as well as long stretches of sunny, blue skies.

Travel in the mountains can also be tough. Early season courses (late May through the end of June) may spend most of their time camping on snow and using snowshoes to travel. Other times, you'll bushwhack through thick forests or scramble around boulders the size of refrigerators. Rivers are icy from snowmelt and can be difficult or impossible to cross. You'll traverse steep slopes of snow, loose rock, or grass, and grunt up high-mountain passes. There will be times when you will wish you were somewhere else, but the hard work is worth it. There's nothing quite like taking your pack off at the top of a pass, feeling the wind dry the sweat off your back, and looking down at miles of new country opening up before you. It's exhilarating!

Camping may involve dealing with swarms of mosquitoes and hanging your food to keep it away from bears or other animals. 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. Note that precautions against bear encounters will decrease the opportunities for solitude and privacy on this course. To minimize risk, group size in bear country is generally four persons and you will always camp and travel with a group of your peers nearby. This is a challenging aspect of living in grizzly bear country. Other bear avoidance tactics include meticulously maintaining cleanliness at the cooking sites, making loud calls to warn bears of your presence when moving through areas where visibility is poor, and hiking with bear spray.

Identifying and managing mountain hazards—falling rock, weather, animals, moving water, and steep terrain will be a constant theme in our instruction. Managing risks and being responsible for yourself and your colleagues will help make your expedition in these wild mountains healthy and fun.

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.

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 and Judgment

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



Leadership and Expedition Behavior

Students are exposed to the theory and practice of outdoor leadership, teamwork, and expedition behavior. At NOLS, expedition behavior involves commitment to the group, a positive attitude, and cooperation to achieve goals. Each student is expected to:

- Actively participate in the decision-making process
- Take responsibility for the health and well being of self and others
- Demonstrate sound expedition behavior, including commitment to group decisions and a positive attitude
- Effectively communicate and problem-solve on interpersonal and group levels
- Show initiative in leadership/teaching roles with peers
- Employ leadership styles appropriate to the situation; support others in the leadership role
- Work effectively as a team member
- Take responsibility for learning; set and attain personal goals
- Assist in planning and participate in a student-led, multi-day Small Group Expedition

Outdoor Skills

At NOLS, our students learn to live and travel in the wilderness within a framework of personal well being and care for 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 mountainous terrain using map and/or compass skills
- Utilize off-trail navigation and route-finding techniques to mitigate hazards
- Use fly fishing techniques
- Employ sound bear camping techniques
- Effectively self-arrest and travel on snow.

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 *Leave No Trace* living and travel skills and be able to apply this knowledge to new environments
- Show an understanding, appreciation, and respect for the natural world; know characteristic flora and fauna of the area
- Discuss the history of pertinent environmental problems and offer potential solutions
- Name the land management agencies of the course setting and understand fundamental management directives

At the conclusion of this course, we expect our students to be competent and responsible wilderness travelers and leaders.

