

# Course Description

## Wilderness Horsepacking

### Features Of This Course:

- Trip duration: 21 Days
- 4 days at the NOLS ranch, 17 days in the field
- Elevations of 6,000' - 11,000'
- Camping with a *Leave No Trace* emphasis
- Riding mileage: 80 - 140 miles
- Horse care, handling, and riding in a wilderness setting
- Average age: 18
- Minimum Age: 16
- Average group size: 8 students / 2 instructors / 16 horses

### The Expedition

Horsepacking through the mountains is the quintessential Western adventure. We can all imagine ourselves sitting on a horse, wearing a battered cowboy hat and mud-spattered boots, and leading a packhorse. It's an image straight out of the movies. The NOLS horsepacking course allows you to make that Western dream a reality.

Horsepacking is hard work. You not only have to care for yourself in the mountains, you also have to care for your horses. Nearly every day is spent traveling 5 to 15 miles and involves loading and unloading about 150 pounds of gear. Your mornings begin around 6 am, when you crawl out of your sleeping bags, feed the horses, cook breakfast, break camp, and then saddle and load the horses. When the chores are done, you hit the trail.

The work starts again when you arrive at camp. At this point it's time to unload, unsaddle, water, and hobble or picket the horses, all this before you set up camp and cook dinner. The work is hard, the days are long, and the level of responsibility you shoulder is considerable, but the rewards are great. And you'll learn skills that will allow you to visit the mountains long after the end of your course.

The route for the horsepacking courses depends upon the time of year. Early courses avoid the snows of the mountains by traveling in the Red Desert. This land of multi-colored badlands, sagebrush and low grasses is home to herds of wild horses, antelope, elk, and deer. It's historic country as well. The early wagon trains bound for Oregon, California and Utah skirted the edges of the Red Desert and the ruts left from their passing can still be seen.

Later courses head up into either the Absaroka or the Wind River Mountains. These two ranges are very different. The Absarokas are volcanic and have been carved into deep, lush valleys walled by crumbling cliffs and high plateaus. Elk, moose, bighorn sheep, deer, bear, and wolves all make their home in the Absarokas. The Wind Rivers are a land of jagged granitic peaks, perennial snows, alpine lakes, and rolling tundra. Fishing is world-class in the Winds' lakes and rivers.

Regardless of your route, all courses start at the NOLS Three Peaks Ranch in Boulder, Wyoming. The first four days are spent at the ranch so you can learn new skills slowly. Here you'll be introduced to the basics, skills like catching your horses, grooming, saddling, riding, and packing and loading panniers, as well as tent pitching, stove use, and cooking. You'll camp out these nights to solidify your skills before moving to the field. The last morning at the Ranch, you'll pack up and head for the trailhead leading to the next 17 days in the backcountry.

NOLS is not a "riding skills" school. Our normal speed when traveling is a walk. This allows both horse and rider to negotiate hazards and obstacles. Mountain travel is at a steady but constant pace, not a rapid one.

NOLS courses are designed for you to learn through experience. Your instructors are there to train, supervise, and advise. Ultimately, however, what you learn depends on what you practice. You should expect ongoing verbal coaching and feedback throughout the course. Written performance summaries take place at the end.



## **Student Independence**

On all NOLS courses students will be independent (that is, 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. Away from the field, students often have independent unsupervised time, usually in town, before and after their course.

## **Weather and Other Challenges**

Both mountain and high desert weather is capricious. On any given day, temperatures may range from below freezing to sweltering. Afternoon thunderstorms are common and can be quite violent. Courses may experience snow and rain, or long stretches of sun and blue skies. There are bugs and critters in the mountains and on the plains, that you'll have to manage, but after more than 40 years in this business, we have some tricks to help make life as comfortable as possible out in the hills.

Travel with horses can be tough. They are unpredictable and may kick, bite, or buck. "Rodeos," where your gear and pack horse explode in different directions, are not unheard of. You'll ride through rocky, wet, muddy, snow-covered ground, over fallen trees, and on trails that are not maintained. Horses can stumble and fall with you beneath them. Helmets are worn while riding at our ranch facility and when new skills are introduced. Helmets are not typically worn by horsepackers in the backcountry; however, they are available if you would prefer one for use in the backcountry. There may also be times where you must get off and lead your horse due to the steepness of the terrain or, potentially, an injury to the horse. Horsepacking also includes lifting and carrying awkward, heavy loads and managing horses around stock trucks, corrals, and horse trailers. There will be times when you may wish you were somewhere else, but the hard work is worth it. There's nothing quite like reaching the top of a pass, feeling the wind on your face, and looking down at miles of new country opening up before you. It's exhilarating!

Bear avoidance techniques while camping and traveling will also be integrated into this course. Note that precautions against bear encounters may decrease the opportunities for solitude and privacy. We will protect all food and attractants from bears. Other bear avoidance tactics include meticulously maintaining cleanliness at the cooking sites and making loud calls to warn bears of your presence. Please note that avoidance techniques do not guarantee that a bear encounter will not occur.

Remember, once you leave the trucks and trailers at the trailhead, you'll be miles from the amenities of civilization. Telephones, ambulances, and hospitals may be several days away. Managing risks and assuming responsibility 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**

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.

## **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 wilderness, horsepacking environment, e.g., unpredictable stock, weather, river crossings, terrain difficulties, etc.
- Consistently perform appropriate techniques to reduce or avoid hazards
- Display sound judgment and an awareness of group, self, and stock limitations



## **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; assist in planning travel routes and camp selection
- Take responsibility for the health and well being of self and others
- Display sound expedition behavior, including commitment to group decisions, a positive attitude, and good communication
- Show initiative in leadership and teaching roles with peers
- Employ leadership styles appropriate to the situation; work effectively as a team member
- Take responsibility for learning; set and attain personal goals

## **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 camp and grazing site selection and shelter set-up
- Travel efficiently in mountainous terrain using map and/or compass skills
- Utilize on- and off-trail navigation and route-finding techniques to mitigate hazards
- Take responsibility for the care and maintenance of personal and group equipment
- Employ sound bear camping techniques

## **Environmental Studies**

Students develop an awareness of how to apply *Leave No Trace* 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 varied settings
- Show an understanding, appreciation, and respect for the natural world; identify characteristic flora and fauna of the area
- Display an understanding of the horse as an accessible, efficient, and environmentally sound mode of wilderness travel
- Discuss the history of pertinent environmental problems and offer potential solutions
- Demonstrate a knowledge of public land management and discuss the means to be involved in issues of interest

## **Fundamental Horse Skills**

Students are given a basic, but intensive, introduction to the knowledge and skills necessary to manage horses. Each student is expected to:

- Exhibit a working knowledge of properly controlled riding and leading techniques
- Display alertness and caution around horses
- Perform fundamental horse packing skills, including: competent catching, haltering, grooming, bridling, packing and loading, leading, tie-up techniques, and low impact overnight restraints
- Follow a set procedure and timeline for setting up camp and putting horses out for the night
- Show a working knowledge of basic horse nutritional needs and veterinary care

**As a result of this course, we expect our students to be competent and responsible wilderness travelers and leaders.**

