

# Course Description

## Spring Semester in the Rockies

### Features Of This Course:

- Average Group Size: 12-15 Students & 3-6 Instructors/section
- Average Age: 20
- Trip Duration: 73-77 Field Days & 8-14 In-Town and Transition Days, depending on your wilderness medicine course (WFA or WFR)
- Average Pack Weight: 55 lbs.
- Minimum Age: 17

### The Expedition

The Spring Semester in the Rockies is a leadership semester full of fun and challenging adventures based in experiential education. A semester spent in the outdoors entails two and a half months camping out, exploring the west, developing skills, meeting people, pushing yourself, and having fun. The Semester in the Rockies will take you from the high peaks of Wyoming to the red canyons of Utah. You may find yourself jamming your hands and feet into granite cracks or sliding through sandstone slot canyons. You'll work hard traveling through knee-deep snow, paddling through foaming whitewater or keeping yourself and others warm and well fed in a mountain storm. You may also enjoy top-roping at a challenging crag, identifying plants and wildlife, climbing a peak, sleeping out under the stars, watching the rain from under an overhang, and reading by candlelight in a cozy snow shelter. These semesters are learning adventures that leave you with the skills and experience to travel in the wilderness long after the end of your course.

By choosing a semester start date you choose from a number of different activity combinations—horse packing, climbing, canyon hiking, canoeing, kayaking, or winter travel—to ensure your semester provides you with the skills you want to learn. (See the NOLS catalog or [www.nols.edu](http://www.nols.edu) for specific combinations and dates.) Your instructors will change as the sections change so that you get the most qualified leadership we can offer.

You'll be living with two or three other students in a “cook group” throughout the semester. Usually the composition of the cook group changes each ration period (7-12 days) so you get to know and work closely with all the members of your course. 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 new skills. Before you know it, you'll be savoring homemade pizza or cinnamon rolls—gourmet delicacies that you made from scratch on a single-burner stove.

On your hiking section, you will travel in small groups, usually of four to six. Initially, these groups will include an instructor. Eventually, once students have learned the intricacies of map reading, route finding, and hazard evaluation, they often make daily moves on their own. NOLS courses are designed for learning to take place through experience.

Group dynamics and leadership are an integral part of our curriculum. You'll learn how to live and work closely with your course mates while you travel through the mountains. Bringing a tolerance for adversity and uncertainty, respect for other members, and a willingness to work hard will be critical to success. 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.

During the course of your semester, you may return to Lander or you may be “on the road” and have your transition days in towns like Moab or Delta, UT or Driggs, ID. The semester continues through these transitions, as you organize and take care of gear, get oriented to new sections, receive mail, and possibly squeeze showers and laundry in! Due to long travel distances, plan to spend several days in a school bus on the road over the course of your semester. The final day of the semester is spent in town de-issuing equipment and finishing evaluations. That evening there will be an end-of-course banquet.



**Winter Section Features:**

- Trip Duration: 10 – 16 Days
- Skiing
- 70 lb. combined weight between your pack and sled
- Group Size: 12 -15 Students / 3-4 Instructors

Imagine winter in the mountains. Cloaked in a blanket of glittering snow, the world is transformed into a quiet, magical place where icicles decorate the trees, animal tracks tell a story, and untracked powder snow calls you to ski. Temperatures can plummet to 40° F below zero, and three feet of snow can fall in one storm, but hard work and a positive attitude make winter one of the most rewarding times to travel in the backcountry.

Your winter route will take place in one of these Wyoming mountain ranges: the Wyoming, Absaroka, Gros Ventre, or Wind River Mountains. While these mountains are very different geologically, they are all known for dependable snow and excellent skiing. Heavily timbered slopes are intermixed with open glades and broad bowls. The steep, expert terrain is broken up by gentle beginner and intermediate slopes. These mountains are magical places to explore and exhilarating areas to learn the intricacies of backcountry skiing and winter travel.

During this section, you will learn the basics of snow camping, winter travel, avalanche assessment, snow physics, cold-weather physiology, and winter ecology. Your homes will be elaborate snow shelters and flies. Whether you build igloos, quinzhees or snow caves, you'll find these shelters are remarkably warm and comfortable. Outside the wind can rage, snow can fall, and the temperature can drop. Inside, you'll be reading by candlelight oblivious to the blizzard beyond your snow walls.

Camp chores take up a big portion of your days. Melting snow for water, shoveling, building kitchens and shelters, packing up piles of gear and clothes, and staying warm and dry are time-consuming activities. But once you become efficient, the time you free up can be spent learning about winter ecology, furthering your avalanche assessment skills, teaching classes, or skiing untracked powder. If weather and snow conditions permit, you may also climb a peak.

In these mountains, avalanches are not unusual and can bury unwary skiers. Predicting the likelihood of an avalanche occurring has much in common with weather forecasting; experience and practice are necessary to refine your judgment. An extensive portion of the curriculum will be spent teaching avalanche assessment and rescue techniques.

**Canyon Section Features:**

- Trip Duration: 23 – 30 Days
- Hiking Route: 70 -120 Miles
- Average Pack Weight: 55 lbs.
- Average Group Size: 8-10 Students / 2 Instructors or 12-15 Students / 3 Instructors

On this section, you will backpack through the red rock canyons of the Colorado Plateau in southern Utah or northern Arizona. This area is characterized by rugged terrain and delicate beauty, with red sandstone and green junipers adding color to the arid landscape. Relics of the Anasazi culture may still be seen in the form of ruins, petroglyphs, and potsherds. At times you will travel across the mesa tops with spectacular views in all directions while at others, you'll wind your way through the labyrinthine depths of deeply incised waterways.

Once in the canyons, you will learn fundamental wilderness travel skills. Map reading and route-finding can be tricky in this convoluted country where your travel days may range from three miles of dense bushwhacking and wading to ten miles of flat mesa walking. You will be challenged by the difficulty of minimizing your impact in an area where the soil is fragile and the water, you previously took for granted, is hard to find.

Some canyon areas have group size limits that are smaller than the size of your semester group. In these areas, two semester groups of 12-15 students are divided into three hiking groups of 8 to 10 students for the duration of the section.

In addition to learning to live and travel in the desert environment, you will focus on gaining an understanding of the area's natural history and geology. Exposed landforms provide textbook illustrations of the land's geologic past, and thickly vegetated riparian zones contrast with stark expanses of rock, sand and black bush. Prehistoric Indian cultures once thrived in the region and you may view the remains they have left tucked away in alcoves.



Leadership is an important component of your canyon section. You will be given more and more responsibility for the structure of the course as your skills and expertise improve. On many canyon sections, student leadership teams are responsible for planning the day's activities. Often students will teach classes as well.

### **Independent Student Group Travel**

An emphasis of the canyon section 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 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. When you have demonstrated the necessary competency, you may travel in student-led groups without instructors for a day at a time as you go 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.

### **Solos**

On this section you may have an opportunity to do a "solo" when you spend a day and night alone. There is no hiking during the solo. Many people find this experience a good way to reflect on the course and immerse themselves in the environment.

### **River Travel Section Features:**

- Travel By Kayak, Raft, Canoe Or A Combination Of The Three
- Combination Of Flat Water and Whitewater
- Average Group Size: 12-15 Students / 3 – 5 Instructors
- Trip Duration: 16 – 18 Days

The river section of your semester takes place on a combination of the following rivers: the Green, Yampa, Dolores, White, Owyhee or San Juan. These rivers run through deeply incised canyons of multi-colored sandstone, gray limestone, or dark basalt. For days, you'll float downstream with little more than a ribbon of sky visible above your head. You may see ancient pictographs or petroglyphs on the walls or ruined pueblo buildings tucked up into overhangs. After a series of days, the canyons open up and the views become more expansive. Lush riparian vegetation gives way to sagebrush and scrub flats. You will be in a paradoxical world of water surrounded by a desert starved for moisture.

Depending on water levels, time of season, and permit availability, you may travel by canoe, kayak, and/or raft. The volume of water in the rivers can vary with factors beyond our control, including dam releases, recent rains, and the previous winter's snowpack. During high-water levels, kayaks and canoes may be inappropriate for beginners and we'll use paddle or oar rafts. Each mode of transport on the river carries its own challenges and rewards and all require you to learn to read the water and respond appropriately.

Initial instruction will focus on how to rig and load your craft and will stress river camping techniques. On kayak/raft sections, cooking chores rotate, with three or four people doing a single day's cooking for the entire group. Everyone will share daily tasks such as setting up and breaking camp, rigging and unloading boats. On the canoe sections, cooking will be done in the three or four person groups common on the other sections.

Early boating skills focus on basic strokes and maneuvering, crewing and captaining skills, elementary river hydrology, group travel, and simple rescue techniques. Once you've mastered the fundamentals, more advanced instruction will be presented. You will learn to perform eddy turns, peel-outs, and ferries—skills essential in allowing you to maneuver through rapids and swift water.

The rivers we run start with lots of flat water and small rapids to help you get comfortable in your boat. As you move downstream, the current picks up and the rapids become more challenging. You'll learn to scout the river and to employ the measures necessary to ensure your party's health and well being as you negotiate rough sections. Exercising leadership in these situations will challenge your communication and decision-making skills.

While on the river, you will have time to observe the natural history of the area. The contrast between the wet river corridor and the spectacularly exposed geology makes a perfect classroom for studying plants, animals and ecosystems. Rivers are a



popular wilderness resource, and their use involves special management and conservation concerns. You will discuss river use, management, and wilderness ethics specific to the river environment while you travel downstream.

### **Climbing Section Features:**

- Trip Duration: 16 – 22 Days
- Average Group Size: 12-15 Students / 3 – 4 Instructors

Semester climbing camps take place in a number of different areas. You may find yourself jamming your hands into cracks at Devil's Tower National Monument in Wyoming or searching for varnished black holds on the sandstone walls of Red Rocks, near Las Vegas, Nevada. Camps are also held on the granite slabs of the House Range in Utah; at Split Rock, Lankin Dome and Sinks Canyon in Wyoming; at Unaweep Canyon in Colorado; or in the Needles/Mt. Rushmore area of South Dakota. All of these areas offer excellent rock quality and climbs that will challenge beginners and experts alike.

Climbing camps are base camps. You'll set up your tents, establish a kitchen, and stay in one place for the duration of the section. You may be camped in established campgrounds or in more pristine areas. Regardless, you should expect to encounter people on this section and you may end up driving to and from the crags each day.

Instruction will progress from the basics of movement on rock, knots, rope handling, and belaying to protection placement, anchors, rappelling, and rope-system management. Plan to spend a lot of time climbing. More advanced topics such as fixed-rope ascension, direct aid, and self-rescue may be addressed. If you are ready, there may be opportunities to lead. NOLS has standard criteria used to evaluate readiness and ability before allowing you to lead a climb.

Climbing may be done as part of a large group when top-roping or in a small group of three to four for multi-pitch routes. You will be able to progress at your own speed. The instructors emphasize a safe, positive attitude toward climbing and the development of your own natural abilities. For these reasons, our climbing instructors are selected for their teaching ability as well as for their technical expertise.

Of all the activities you will experience, climbing is the most weather dependent. We attempt to schedule courses so that the climbing sections will have good weather but due to many variables beyond our control (permits, areas, and not the least, weather itself) we cannot guarantee this. You should come prepared to spend a lot of time on the rock, but understand this does not always happen. We will do everything possible to make your time productive but only large measures of self-motivation can help overcome the "bad weather blues."

### **Horsepacking Section Features – 2010 Semester: Section 5 Only**

- 4 Days At The NOLS Ranch, 12 Field Days
- Riding Mileage: ~ 75 Miles
- Elevations Of 6,000' - 8,000'
- Average Group Size: 8 Students / 2 Instructors (Your semester group will be split into two sections.)

Horsepacking through the red desert 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 string of packhorses. It's an image straight out of the movies. A NOLS horse packing section allows you to make that western dream a reality.

Horsepacking is hard work. You not only have to care for yourself, you also have to care for your horses. Nearly every day is spent traveling 5 to 10 miles and involves loading and unloading about 150 pounds of gear. Your mornings begin around 6 am when you crawl out of your sleeping bag, cook breakfast and break camp. Then you must feed, saddle and load the horses. When the chores are done, you hit the trail.

The work begins again when you arrive at camp at the end of the day. Tasks include unloading, unsaddling, watering, and hobbling or picketing the horses. All this takes place before you set up camp and cook dinner. The work is demanding, the days long, and the level of responsibility considerable, but the rewards are great as well. You'll learn skills that will allow you to visit the mountains on horseback long after the end of your course.

The route for the horsepacking courses traverses Wyoming's spectacular Red Desert and skirts the foothills of the Wind River Mountains. 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.

This section starts at the NOLS Three Peaks Ranch in Boulder, Wyoming and is the final one of the semester. The first four days are spent with the entire group working together at the ranch so you can absorb 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 at the Ranch's campground to solidify your skills before moving to the field. On the morning of the fifth day, you'll pack up and head for the trailhead in two separate groups to finish out the semester.

NOLS is not a "riding skills" school. Our speed when traveling is a walk. This allows both horse and rider to negotiate hazards and obstacles. Helmets are worn when riding at our ranch facility when in the corrals and whenever new skills are being introduced. Horse packers in the backcountry do not typically wear helmets; however, they are available if you would like one. Horsepacking travel is at a steady but constant pace, not a rapid one.

### **Wilderness First Aid (WFA) – 2010 Semester: Sections 3, 4 & 5**

A Wilderness First Aid (WFA) course that features training specifically applicable to wilderness situations is part of the semester curriculum. Staff from the Wilderness Medicine Institute of NOLS will teach your WFA. Fast-paced and hands-on, the two and a half day course covers a wide range of wilderness medicine topics for people who travel and work in the outdoors. This course is pre-approved by such organizations as: the American Camping Association, the United States Forest Service, the US Coast Guard and other governmental agencies.

### **Wilderness First Responder (WFR) – 2010 Semester: Sections 1 & 2**

This is an 80-hour backcountry first aid course, taught by staff from the Wilderness Medicine Institute of NOLS. It will be held at an eight-day base camp. This is the standard course for outdoor professionals and provides you with the tools to make critical medical and evacuation decisions in remote locations. Half of your time will be spent completing practical skills, case studies and scenarios designed to challenge your decision-making abilities.

### **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 starts or between sections of semesters. Students are expected to maintain the same level of expedition behavior and adherence to NOLS' drug/alcohol/tobacco policy while transitioning between sections, either on the road or while staying at the Noble Hotel, Three Peaks Ranch, or the Vernal River Base.

### **College Credit**

A student can earn up to 16 credit hours through the University of Utah for successfully completing the Spring Semester in the Rockies. Please see the college credit paperwork enclosed in your packet. Although there will be many "classes" during the semester, credit is granted for the experiential nature of the learning, not for formalized class work.

Regardless of whether or not you register for credit, you should expect ongoing verbal coaching and feedback throughout the semester, with written performance summaries at the end of each section.

### **Weather and Other Challenges**

Spring weather in the inter-mountain west is capricious. On any given day, temperatures may range from below freezing to sweltering. During your semester, you'll feel the seasons change from the cold days of winter to the verdant days of spring. You'll learn to live comfortably outside in blizzards, rainstorms, wind, and sunshine. Given the altitude and latitude of the areas you will visit, cold and snowy conditions can occur any month of the year. There are times when you will be cold, wet or tired, but you will learn to manage these situations and maybe even smile while you do.

Life in the wilderness can be tough. You may be off-trail bushwhacking through thick vegetation or battling wind gusts that threaten to "turtle" you. You'll traverse steep slopes of loose rock, snow or grass, and grunt up steep passes. There will be times when you'll 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 long climb, feeling the wind dry the sweat off your back and looking down at miles of new country opening up



before you. It's exhilarating!

Each skill section has its own set of hazards. River travel may include large, crashing waves, shallow water, rocks, hypothermia, sun exposure, re-circulating holes, fallen trees, and strong currents. Rock climbing occurs on exposed cliffs where loose rock and unexpected falls are potential dangers. Horses are unpredictable. Finally, winter hazards include avalanches, cold temperatures, and demanding travel on skis.

While bear encounters are rare for spring semesters, bear avoidance techniques will be integrated into mountain hiking and river sections. Precautions against bear encounters will decrease the opportunities for solitude and privacy on this course. You will protect food from bears during mountain hiking sections. Other bear avoidance tactics include meticulously maintaining cleanliness at the cooking sites and making loud calls to warn bears of your presence.

Notice of these potential hazards and challenges is not meant to intimidate you, but they are the reality of living and traveling in the wilderness. Identifying and managing hazards—which could be falling rock, stormy weather, animals, moving water or steep terrain—will be a constant theme in our instruction. Throughout your course, 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 places 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. For this reason, students are not permitted to take personal music players (iPods, MP3 players, CD players, etc.), cell phones, or satellite phones on NOLS 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.

### **General Course Objectives**

Each course is unique due to variables such as route, group dynamics, and environmental conditions. While we recognize and work with these educational variables during the semester, by the end of this course we expect each student to:

### **Risk Management and Judgment**

- Demonstrate knowledge of the hazards in the varied environments encountered and display the ability to apply this knowledge to new environments
- Consistently perform specific techniques to reduce or avoid hazards
- Formulate and show an ability to implement contingency plans for groups in the outdoors
- Display sound judgment and decision making skills based on knowledge of equipment, the wilderness environment, other expedition members, and one's own limits
- Demonstrate an ability to prevent, evaluate, and care for medical problems in wilderness settings
- Successfully complete the Wilderness First Aid or Wilderness First Responder course

### **Leadership and Teamwork**

- Effectively communicate ideas and concerns on individual and group levels
- Accurately identify strengths, skills, and areas for growth in developing outdoor leadership
- Take responsibility for learning; set and attain personal goals
- Display the ability to plan and carry out responsible and environmentally sound expeditions; be aware of what terrain is appropriate for one's experience level
- Take initiative in teaching/leadership roles with peers
- Plan and participate in a multi-day, student-led small group expedition
- Work effectively as a member of a team; display a positive attitude despite hardship
- Initiate resolution of interpersonal conflicts
- Play an active role in defining group goals and expectations
- Demonstrate initiative in group activities and tasks
- Support others in their development and growth



## **Outdoor Skills**

- Live proficiently in all course environments; dress effectively for a variety of conditions
- Demonstrate environmentally sensitive and efficient campsite selection and tent or tarp set-up skills
- Prepare nutritious cooked meals using a camp stove or fire
- Use topographic maps and compass to travel competently in challenging mountain and canyon terrain
- Use off-trail navigation and route finding to mitigate terrain hazards
- Take responsibility for the care and organization of personal and group equipment
- Exhibit good personal hygiene; be punctual and organized
- Display fundamental knowledge and skills in specific pursuits, e.g., climbing, caving, river travel, skiing.

## **Environmental Studies**

- Consistently demonstrate sound minimum impact living and travel skills on personal and group levels; be able to extrapolate knowledge to varied settings
- Show an understanding, appreciation and respect for the natural world; identify characteristic flora and fauna of this region
- Demonstrate familiarity with the geography of the inter- mountain west
- Understand the history of pertinent environmental issues and offer potential solutions
- Display a broad elementary knowledge of field natural history, including: birds, mammals, plants, weather, geology, snow science; focus on active, observational study
- Understand the function, organization, and local concerns of state and federal land management agencies
- Make plans for the transference of wilderness ethics and practices into daily personal and professional life

**At the conclusion of the Spring Semester in the Rockies, we expect our students to be competent and responsible wilderness travelers and leaders.**

