

# Course Description

## Southwest Outdoor Educator

### Features Of This Course:

- Backpacking for 18 days
- Rock climbing for 10 days
- Designed for practicing or aspiring outdoor educators
- Hiking and climbing in the Sonoran Desert
- Minimum age: 18
- Average age: 28
- Average pack weight: 50 lbs.
- Average group size: 12-15 students and 3-4 instructors

### The Expedition

The Southwest's Sonoran desert is famous for its incredible diversity and wealth of plants and animals. It's not the barren, sandy place that often comes to mind when people imagine a desert. On this course, you'll travel through saguaro cactus, mesquite, ocotillo and palo verde trees. Quail, songbirds and raptors share the skies, and desert bighorn sheep, mountain lions, and javelina move across the land. For 18 days, you'll explore the Kofa National Wildlife Refuge learning the backcountry living skills you'll need to lead others on wilderness trips. Then you'll move to Cochise Stronghold—a maze of granite pinnacles in the Dragoon Mountains—where you'll develop rock-climbing skills for 10 days.

The Southwest Outdoor Educator is designed to provide you with the opportunity to develop the knowledge and skills necessary for teaching and leading field-based wilderness education programs.

The course begins at NOLS Southwest in Tucson, Arizona. After an orientation to the course and our facility, we'll issue equipment, bag food and pack our packs. There will also be an opportunity to talk with the NOLS administration about the organization and logistical aspects of our programs. We can discuss everything from federal land permits to equipment planning and rations and give you a perspective on running an outdoor program. Our first night will be spent camped at NOLS Southwest in Tucson.

Early in the morning, on the second day, you will load your pack and head to the Kofa National Wildlife Refuge for the backpacking section of the course. The Kofa encompasses 660,000 acres of classic desert basin and range country on the border of Arizona and California. Two parallel mountain ranges—the Kofa and Castle Dome Mountains—rise sharply from the plains and provide a home for the desert bighorn sheep that this refuge was created to protect. Most of our camps will be near water tanks that the sheep use.

We'll start slowly to allow time for you to grow accustomed to carrying a pack that may weigh in excess of 50 pounds. Initial classes will focus on basic wilderness living skills such as fly pitching, stove use and map reading. Leave No Trace camping in arid environments will be a prominent theme throughout the course. This is the time for you to learn new techniques as well as refine the skills you may already possess. Even seasoned outdoor educators can learn from observing the teaching techniques employed to teach the basics.

As expertise increases, you'll become more involved in decision-making, leadership and hazard evaluation. Reading topographic maps and route finding will be an integral part of daily travel. Students interested in practicing their formal teaching may teach a 15-30 minute class on a topic pertaining to the course curriculum. This will provide an opportunity to receive feedback on the style, content and effectiveness of your teaching techniques. Topics usually relate to the NOLS core curriculum or desert natural history.

One unique aspect of this hiking section is the opportunity to meet with a representative from the Wildlife Refuge. If the opportunity presents, we will coordinate a field visit from a representative of the Wildlife Refuge. In conjunction with that visit, you'll have the opportunity to participate in a one-day service project. In years past, some groups have worked to refurbish one of the water tanks. These "hydration stations" are critical water supplies for various species of wildlife. You'll



have the opportunity to learn more about the management of this beautiful Wildlife Refuge. Previous NOLS students have noted this as one of the many highlights of their course.

On day 20 of the course, you'll drive back to Tucson to re-supply the field rations and pick up your climbing equipment. Along the way, you will stop for a quick shower. You'll then drive approximately three hours to Cochise Stronghold and establish a base camp for the last 10 days of the course. This transition day begins early in the morning and finishes late. Please do not plan on attending to personal affairs during this time.

Cochise Stronghold, a natural fortress guarded by granite domes and spires, was the home and refuge for the Chiricahua Apache and their great leader Cochise. These rock walls are an excellent place to learn climbing. You'll be introduced to basic climbing systems: anchors, knots, rope handling, signals, belaying and rappelling. The emphasis is on teaching you how to evaluate anchors and supervise top rope sites. There may also be opportunities for 'mock' lead climbs and multi-pitch climbing. This section is not intended to teach in-depth climbing techniques. You'll leave the section with the skills required to supervise top rope climbing under controlled conditions.

While base camping at Cochise Stronghold, you will still sleep in tents or under tarps. In addition, you will learn the fine arts associated with living comfortably in that setting. Fresh veggies will be part of your ration. You'll cook on two-burner propane stoves. An extra book for bedtime reading or cotton pants for climbing might seem like luxuries after finishing your hiking section. When you don't have to carry these items on your back, you can afford to bring a few small extra comforts.

The field experience ends with course evaluations. This course may run in other locations due to unforeseen circumstances.

### **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.

### **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. 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 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 three 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 three days. Students are aware of where the instructors and the other student groups are planning to travel and camp. The instructors with emergency 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**

The Southwest can be host to extremes in temperatures and weather conditions. Though warm mild weather is the norm, students should expect anything from soaking winter rains, prolonged exposure to sun, snow, or wind, and subfreezing temperatures. Sometimes these weather changes occur in a matter of minutes; other times storms or cold temperatures can last for days.

Both the Kofa and the Stronghold contain rugged desert mountain ranges characterized by deeply incised canyons, steep slopes, rocky terrain and sheer cliffs. Travel in the Kofa is almost entirely off-trail, requiring constant attention to route finding. The rock here is loose and easily breakable adding to the challenge of hiking. While in the backcountry, we will be far from roads and telephones. In the event of an accident or illness, it may take several days to get to a medical facility.



The Southwest is home to rattlesnakes and other potentially harmful insects and reptiles. Various species of cactus and other plants with sharp spines make it a challenge to avoid becoming a human pincushion. An important part of the curriculum is learning to identify these hazards in order to reduce the chance of injury.

Water is the life-blood of the desert. The hiking route is designed to go from one water-source to another. These water sources are either man-made “tanks” or naturally occurring pools found deep in the clefts of the rocks. Often it is many miles between water sources and it may be necessary to carry a day’s supply of water between camps. The Southwest has been experiencing drought conditions for the past few years. If water shortages dictate a change, the location might be moved to another wilderness area for the backcountry portion of this course.

Identifying and managing the hazards of steep terrain, falling and rolling rocks, weather, animals, and spiny vegetation will be a constant theme in our instruction. The consistent practice of risk management techniques and assumption of responsibility for yourself and other group members will help make your expedition in these wild mountains healthy and enjoyable.

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. 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.

### **Southwest Outdoor Educator 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 see each student 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. Objectives include the ability to:

- demonstrate a developing knowledge of the hazards in mountain and desert environment
- recognize and minimize risk to self and others
- understand emergency procedures for the environment
- demonstrate competent first aid skills
- use developing experience and judgment to implement sound decisions and follow them through to completion

#### **Leadership and Teamwork**

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. Objectives include the ability to:

- influence the group in a positive way; support a positive learning environment
- work effectively as a member of a team
- communicate clearly; actively listen and state personal opinions with clarity
- accurately identify personal strengths, skills and areas for growth in developing outdoor leadership styles
- take responsibility for learning through setting and attaining personal goals
- Appropriately manage conflict
- use abilities and initiative in a leadership role with peers
- use appropriate and situational decision making skills



## **Outdoor Skills**

At NOLS our students learn to live and travel in the wilderness within a framework of personal well-being and care of the environment. Objectives include the ability to:

- live comfortably in mountain and desert environments, including the ability to camp, cook, and dress for varied conditions with minimum impact
- travel competently in rugged terrain using off-trail navigation, hazard evaluation, and backpacking techniques
- experience basic technical rock climbing techniques including rappelling, top roping and anchor placement
- demonstrate ability to be organized and efficient with gear
- consistently arrive prepared for daily events
- demonstrate responsible use and care of personal and group equipment

## **Environmental Studies**

Students develop awareness of how to apply minimum-impact ideas to their lives after the course. Objectives include the ability to:

- practice sound Leave No Trace camping skills.
- use basic observation and interpretive skills to demonstrate an understanding and respect for the natural world
- understand the history, facts, and potential solutions to relevant environmental issues
- understand basic organization and responsibilities of land management agencies.

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

