

C O U R S E D E S C R I P T I O N

Naval Academy Alaska Leadership Expedition

Features Of This Course:

- Route length: 90-150 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
- Average group size: 14 students / 3 instructors

The Expedition

This course is a self-reliant expedition that hikes for 26 days in the remote mountains of either south central or interior Alaska. Typically, your route in the Talkeetna, Alaska, Chugach or Wrangell Mountains will start below treeline and head into the mountains along river valleys or up steep mountainsides. As you head further into the mountains the trees will disappear and you'll reach the open country known as tundra. The vistas here are typically consist 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. Alaskan mountains 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 may 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.

The first thing that you will notice upon your arrival in Alaska is the light. While you won't see the sun at midnight in the latitudes where we travel, it will stay light through the night during June and July. This offers unique opportunities for active, long days though your body may take a little while to adjust and learn to sleep when it is still light at 2 a.m.!

Teamwork and leadership are the benchmarks of the NOLS' core curriculum. At NOLS, leadership means timely and appropriate actions that guide a group to set and achieve realistic goals. NOLS teaches situational leadership that demands different decision-making styles depending on group skill, task urgency and outcome predictability. NOLS Professional Training customizes this time-tested curriculum to a wide variety of audiences from college and private schools to corporations to NASA astronauts. You will learn how to live and work closely with your course mates while you travel through the mountains. Tolerance for adversity and uncertainty, a willingness to work hard, and respect for your comrades will be critical to the success of the expedition as a whole.

NOLS instructors provide structured briefing, debriefing, feedback, technical expertise, risk management, evaluation, classes and participant leadership and followership opportunities. 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 will receive ongoing verbal coaching and input from instructors, as well as written evaluations at the end of the course.

You'll be living with two or three other students in a "cook" group during the course. These small groups disperse the impact on the land and enable you to master the art of backcountry cooking and living.

Student Independence and Independent Student Group Travel

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.



This course emphasizes 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. Initial travel groups of four to six students will include an instructor who will teach travel skills and leadership. As you gain proficiency with map reading, route finding, and hazard evaluation, the instructor allows you to take on more decision-making responsibility. When you demonstrate the necessary competency, you may travel in student-led groups without instructors 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 will likely culminate in a student expedition. With instructor oversight, student expedition groups (usually four to six students each) select leaders, then plan and execute a multi-day independent student-led expedition. 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 locator beacon that when activated in the event of a serious emergency will initiate a response from local search and rescue agencies. 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.

Of all the courses available to USNA midshipmen, this is one of the courses that offers the most expansive and in-depth opportunities for student leadership, including the likelihood of beginning daily independent student group travel earlier in the course than other course types.

Weather and Other Challenges

Given the latitude of these mountain ranges, cold and snowy conditions can occur any month of the year. You should expect highly variable weather that changes quickly from hot sunshine to rain or snow. Precipitation is very common here. It is not unusual to experience rain for more than half of your course.

Daily travel can be arduous. You will mostly hike off-trail and have to negotiate boulder fields, bogs, tussocks, dense willow thickets, rough river bars and steep slopes while carrying a pack weighing approximately 45% of your body weight. Rivers are frequent obstacles that you will learn to cross with minimum risk, but your feet and boots may be wet all day.

Bear avoidance techniques while camping and hiking will be integrated into your daily routine. Precautions against bear encounters will decrease the opportunities for solitude and privacy on this course. 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 where visibility is poor.

NOLS will provide the skills and knowledge you need for identifying and managing hazards, but a positive attitude is critical for ensuring the well being and success of the entire group. The consistent practice of risk management techniques and assumption of responsibility for yourself and other group members will help make your expedition to these wild mountains healthy and enjoyable.

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 that each student accomplishes the following objectives:

Leadership and Teamwork

Students are exposed to the theory and practice of outdoor leadership, teamwork, and expedition behavior. NOLS teaches a situational leadership that demands different decision-making styles depending on group skill, task urgency and outcome predictability. At NOLS, expedition behavior involves commitment to the group, acceptance of others, and cooperation to achieve goals. Each student is expected to:

- Function effectively in all four leadership roles: self-leadership, active followership, designated leadership and peer leadership.
- Practice and develop competence in NOLS' seven leadership skills:



1. Continually increase technical competence in all skill areas
 2. Display strong expedition behavior by working effectively as a member of a team and serving group goals with a positive attitude
 3. Maintain flexibility, commitment and positive attitude in the face of adversity and uncertainty
 4. Accurately identify personal strengths and areas for growth
 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. Employ leadership styles and decision-making strategies appropriate to the situation
 7. Effectively communicate ideas and concerns on an individual and group level
- Take responsibility for learning through setting and attaining personal goals
 - Respond to problem situations using decision-making and planning skills
 - Provide effective oral and written feedback
 - Take responsibility for the health and safety of self and others
 - Assist in planning and participate in a student-led, multi-day Student Expedition

Risk Management

NOLS teaches wilderness users to practice responsible habits that promote the health and safety of self and others.

Each student is expected to:

- Demonstrate knowledge of the hazards in a mountain environment, e.g., bears, rockfall, weather, and river crossings
- 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 a contingency plan for a group in the outdoors
- Display sound judgment and an awareness of group and self-limits

Wilderness Skills

NOLS students learn to live and travel in the wilderness within a framework of personal safety and care for the environment.

Each student is expected to:

- Travel competently in mountain terrain using map and compass skills, off-trail navigation, hazard evaluation, route-finding techniques, bear camping and river-crossing techniques
- Live comfortably in a mountain environment; learn to camp, cook, and dress for a variety of conditions
- Accurately assess skills, strengths and endurance in self and others and conservatively apply those limits to given situations
- Demonstrate appropriate travel techniques on rock, snow, and mixed terrain
- Demonstrate the ability to remain composed and thoughtful in difficult and exposed terrain

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 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
- Identify characteristic flora and fauna of the area

