Rocky Mountain Field Ecology Immersion

Grand Mesa National Forest, Colorado
4-day and 7-day Field Courses

Course Description • Course Environment • Groundwork Staff • A Day In The Life
Food On The Program • Arrival • Departure • On-Course Vehicle Use
Communication, Technology, & Electricity • Substances • Dogs • Expectations
Packing List

Overview

Ages: 18+. Cohorts typically have a wide age range. Average age is typically around 30.
Group Size: 6-12 students, 1 instructor, and 1 camp cook
Start/End Location: This course begins and ends at your car-accessible group campsite. For exact location of each course, see the table below (locations vary through the season).
Fly In/Out: Grand Junction, CO. Larger airports are in Denver, CO and Salt Lake City, UT.
Train/Bus Stations Nearby: Grand Junction, CO or Glenwood Springs, CO.
Housing: Participants camp in a car-accessible group campsite, bringing their own tent.
Food: All meals are included, with participants helping our camp cook to prepare food.

Start Date	End Date	Instructor	Camp Location	Camp Elevation
May 29, 2025, 9am	June 1, 2025, 5pm	Kelly Moody	Grand Mesa National Forest near Grand Junction, CO. Google Maps pin	~7,000 feet
July 24, 2025, 9am	July 27, 2025, 5pm	Kelly Moody	Near Overland Reservoir, Grand Mesa NF, near Paonia, CO.	~10,000 feet
October 17, 2025 9am	October 20, 2025, 5pm	Nikki Hill	Unaweep Canyon, CO (exact location will be shared with participants)	~ 7,000 feet

Course Description (May program)

Join ethnobotanist Kelly Moody of the Ground Shots Podcast for a 4 day immersion during the height of late Spring in the Central Rockies to study the ecological niches found from the adobe badlands to the high country mountaintops in the diverse terrain of Western Colorado. As a small group in community, we will focus our studies for this field ecology session on the Grand Mesa, the largest flat topped mountain in the world and venture to areas in the region where we can look at the stories of wild gardens tended by the traditional peoples of these lands, geological and colonial intersectional histories, learn to read the landscapes we explore, dive into basic and intermediate botany, discuss issues of the Colorado River watershed and more.

Class structure includes sit spots and landscape awareness exercises, readings and discussion time that expand our perspectives on land relationships and right relationship with place, plant walks, wild food and medicine teachings, beginner and intermediate level hikes, daily nature journaling workshops to expand our tools for connection to land. All students take home readers with literature for further contemplation and learning. We will have a base camp by our cars and have an outdoor kitchen and cook that provides three meals a day with opportunity to also eat wild foods. All diets are accommodated. We camp around 7,000-8,000 feet but venture down and up in elevation during the class to expand our knowledge of this unique terrain. Leave with tools for connecting to the lands you inhabit anywhere in new and expanded ways for deeper intentional relationships.

Course Description (July program)

Join ethnobotanist Kelly Moody of the Ground Shots Podcast for a 4 day immersion during the height of summer in the Central Rockies to study the ecological niches found in the high country mountaintops of this region. As a small group in community, we will focus our studies for this field ecology session on the Grand Mesa, the largest flat topped mountain in the world where we can look at the stories of wild gardens tended by the traditional peoples of these lands, geological and colonial intersectional histories, learn to read the land we explore, dive into basic and intermediate botany, discuss issues of the Colorado River watershed and more.

Class structure includes sit spots and landscape awareness exercises, readings and discussion time that expand our perspectives on land relationships and right relationship with place, plant walks, wild food and medicine teachings, beginner and intermediate level hikes, daily nature journaling workshops to expand our tools for connection to land. All students take home readers with literature for further contemplation and learning. We will have a base camp by our cars and have an outdoor kitchen and cook that provides three meals a day with opportunity to also eat wild foods. All diets are accommodated. We camp around 9,000-10,000 feet and remain in this elevation during the entirety of the

class. This time of year while being in the high country one can expect variable weather, as we get monsoon rains. We may see mushrooms popping up depending on the weather. Leave with tools for connecting to the lands you inhabit anywhere in new and expanded ways for deeper intentional relationships.

Prepare for weather ranging from hot and dry to cool and wet depending on the monsoon season. There will be creeks and lakes to jump in to cool off. The sun can get intense at higher elevation but there will be opportunities to be in shade if so. Mosquitoes can be around or non-existent at this time depending on the weather. Prepare yourself if you're coming from low elevation to spend a few nights in Paonia or another area nearby to acclimate before hitting camp.

Course Description (October program)

Seed Story Tending: Plant Niche Ecology and Sowing Seeds in Unaweep Canyon
What is land tending from a relational perspective?

It all starts with a seed: Join us for a 4-day immersion into the realm of reading the landscape from the POV of seed dreaming. Seeds are the smallest bundles in the dream of continuance. They carry both a remembrance and a longing, bridging a connection of people to the land from ancestral to future generations. They contain the genetic expression of a climate lineage: banking layers of adaptations in soils from particular seasons of success under particular conditions and awaiting their time of fitting emergence in the ebb and flow of changing regional seasons. Their wisdom resides in patient waiting and clever ways of moving, whether by kindred bearing or opportunistic attachment.

Where, when and how a seed germinates also speaks volumes to the story of a place: what plants show up can tell us a lot about what has happened in a landscape; and the needs of a seed offer guidance in understanding the nuance of niches, for both seeking and establishing wild plants.

During this course, we will delve into seeking out sowing niches for various wild food seeds. Topics we will engage with include:

- **Seed Sensuality:** how seeds monitor environmental conditions over time to decide when to give germination a try.
- **Lithic mulching:** how to get water from rocks in an arid environment
- **Autecology:** The anatomy of how a species fits within the nuanced provisions of a landscape.
- What do the seeds tell us about where they belong and the disturbance regimes that invite their presence?

- How can the shape of roots and shoots lend insight into propagation techniques and niche appropriate considerations?
- **Biocultural Ecology:** The autecology of human roles in ancestral and modern horticulture.

This course will be held on private land under the dedicated stewardship of a live within caretaker. Active participation will include discussions of tending relative to site uses (both ancestral and current), sowing seeds and an invitation to stay after the class for creating a water catchment system for those interested. We will be perched on the spring speckled foothills beneath granite walls that embrace the Unaweep Canyon edge of the Uncompaghre Plateu. Anticipate presence with serene sunset views and crisp fall vibes!

Where do the seeds of some of our wild food friends dream of thriving for future generations of our human and animal kin? What niches and microsites provide for their thriving outside of an agricultural setting and in our seasonal absence? How can we come to glimpse the landscape through a biocultural lens to both honor and reclaim a sense of belonging in the places we live and roam?

Course Environment

Our camps on the Grand Mesa in Grand Mesa National Forest offer us the perfect place to explore the ecologies that Western Colorado has to offer. The land here is rugged, dry, and diverse, with more lush forests sprouting as we move uphill. The Grand Mesa is the largest flat-topped mountain in the world, and Colorado's highest elevation mesa. From our program area, The 14,000-foot peaks of the San Juan Mountains Range rise to the south, while red-rock canyons of the Colorado Plateau sit just to the west.

Climate
Colorado has a high desert climate. In spring and summer, that means extreme weather, with quick changes between hot and cold, wet and dry. Prepare to be in both extreme sunny heat and thunderstorms each afternoon. It's best to expect a mix of everything. For our campsites, we typically see the following weather:

Course Dates	Typical Weather	Avg. Daytime High	Avg. Overnight Low	Possible Bad Weather
May: mid-elevation	Cool days and cold nights. Potential for both hot days or late season snow.	70°F (21°C)	35°F (2°C)	Cold rain, snow, and strong winds
June: mid-elevation	Warm days and cold nights. Potential for hot days or thunderstorms.	75°F (24°C)	40°F (4°C)	Cold rain and strong winds
July & August: high elevation	Warm days and cool nights. Daily cold afternoon thunderstorms.	80°F (27°C)	50°F (10°C)	Cold rain & hail

Elevation
We will have quick access to elevations ranging from 4,000 feet to 11,000 feet. If you are coming from near sea level, we recommend acclimatizing for a night in Grand Junction or a similar location around 5,000 feet in elevation before ascending to elevations above 8,000 feet. Courses in May and June typically camp around 7,000 feet and potentially hike to over 11,000 feet. Courses in July and August typically camp and spend most days above 10,000 feet.

Terrain
Though we camp in a car-accessible location, most of the course will take place on backcountry hikes, both on-trail and off-trail, with the group driving short distances to access different ecological zones. You can expect to hike 2-8 miles each day, with days averaging around 4 miles. Trails are rocky and can be very steep. Terrain off-trail is rugged, and we will likely need to navigate downed trees and boulderfields. At higher elevations snow lingers on the ground until mid-June. Traveling over snow can feel easy, but can present hazards if the snow is thin and covering uneven terrain.

Groundwork Staff

Groundwork staff on field courses are experienced ecologists and naturalists, with years of experience working with and teaching about plants. They are experienced wilderness travelers. All staff are medically trained, carrying a minimum of Wilderness First Aid certifications, with most staff carrying Wilderness First Responder certifications, the industry standard for backcountry and mountain guides. See our website for more on each staff member, including each instructor's medical training.

A Day In The Life

Days in the field are slow and intentional. The schedule will be partly determined with the help of course participants, but the general outline looks like this:

After an early breakfast, you can expect that mornings will include silent observation time of different eco-zones, as well as discussions of readings. Lunch will typically be packed just after breakfast and carried with you in your sealable tupperware bowl. Afternoons will be full of adventures and learning, and you can expect to be away from camp from late morning until early evening. Returning to our camp, participants will have some time to take care of personal tasks. A rotating crew will help to cook dinner for the group, and we'll enjoy a relaxed evening around the campfire.

Food On The Program

There will be plenty of food provided for everyone. We source as much food as we can from Groundwork's educational farm in Paonia, Colorado. All course participants will be on a rotating schedule to help our camp cook prepare meals. We ask that you bring a personal eating dish, ideally some kind of sealing tupperware with a sealing lid to carry meals out onto the trail with you.

We are happy to ensure that folks who have reasonable dietary needs and/or preferences are well taken care of throughout the entire trip. Listing those needs in your logistics paperwork is important for our planning. If you would like to bring your own snacks along for days out in the forest, that is highly encouraged.

Arrival

Please arrive at the campsite listed in the table above no later than the time listed for your course. Camping space is available free of charge the night before the program. Meals are provided beginning at lunch on the first day. If you plan to arrive the night before the course starts, please arrive before nightfall so you have time to settle in and get situated.

If you prefer to fly, the closest airport is Grand Junction Regional Airport (about 1.5 hours from the Grand Mesa). Denver International Airport (about 4.5 hours away) and Salt Lake City International Airport (about 5.25 hours away) are the closest large airports. Grand Junction has an Amtrak train station as well as several bus terminals: long-distance Greyhound service and regional Bustang service from Denver. If you plan to travel to

Grand Junction on public transport and need help arranging a ride to the campsite, we can help connect you to other course participants.

Departure

The 7-day courses end at 1pm, and the 4-day courses end at 5pm. Dinner is not provided on the final day. Participants are welcome to stay one additional night at the campsite free of charge. Groundwork staff may choose to depart soon after the course ends, or may stay at the site another 1-2 days.

On-Course Vehicle Use

During the day, we'll be driving short distances to various trailheads near our campsite in order to access different ecological zones. The group should have enough personal vehicles to transport everybody to these trailheads, and it's our expectation that participants coordinate together to share transportation responsibilities and costs. Groundwork staff doesn't drive participants for insurance reasons (it helps keep program tuition reasonable).

Communication, Technology, & Electricity

The Grand Mesa and Uncompahgre Plateau have no reliable cell phone service. Depending on hikes and exact campsite location, you can sometimes find intermittent cell phone service, depending on your service provider. Please do not plan to have connectivity. In the case of an emergency, cell service is easy to find by walking up onto a ridge. Typically, cell service can be found within a 15 minute drive of your campsite if you need to be in contact.

There is no electricity at our campsite. Laundry facilities are over an hour drive away. If you need to do laundry, we have buckets to wash clothes by hand with a biodegradable soap like Dr. Bronners.

Substances

Groundwork encourages a substance-free camp environment, though we do not explicitly prohibit participants from bringing substances that are legal for people of their age to possess and consume in the state of Colorado (alcohol and marijuana). Any substance use

must be in moderation, outside of scheduled course activities, and in a respectful manner that maintains a positive and safe environment for all participants. Groundwork reserves the right to ask any participant to leave for behavior that does not support a positive and safe group environment, at the sole discretion of Groundwork staff.

Dogs

Groundwork does not allow participants to bring dogs on our field courses.

Expectations of Participants

This course is designed to be a relaxed group environment, where we can live, learn, and have fun together. We recognize that groups come with a diverse range of outdoor experience and ecological knowledge, and we believe that everybody can get what they want out of a course together. We expect participants to:

- Be supportive, helpful members of the group. Contribute in the day-to-day camp tasks, including cooking, cleaning, care for group gear, and general camp organization.
- Complete assignments and participate in classes and discussions.
- Communicate clearly when dealing with issues that are an inevitable part of living and learning together. If you would like your experience to look differently, we'd love to hear about it.
- Come with an open mind, lots of energy, patience, and a sense of adventure/flexibility.
- Proactively care for themselves in the arid environment, asking for help learning new self-care skills if needed. This includes keeping gear well-organized and out of the rain, attending to blisters, injuries, and illnesses in a timely manner, asking for help when needed. This course does not explicitly teach outdoor self-care skills, but instructors are highly trained and experienced and there to help you learn if you ask.

Packing List

This course takes place in a remote mountain environment. While we do have road access, it is best if you arrive with all the equipment you need to be comfortable through the changing Colorado mountain weather. It's easier to keep organized if you pack light, and we also know that people have different comfort levels with camping. In general,

bring what you need to be comfortable for a week in the mountains. If you aren't familiar with outdoor living, we can help get you situated and teach you the skills you need.

There's lots of fancy, expensive outdoor gear for sale out there, and you don't need most of it. Here's a simple packing list to help you prepare. If any equipment proves to be a financial hardship, let us know as soon as you can, and we can arrange an inexpensive rental option for you.

Group Gear Provided By Groundwork			
Kitchen & Cooking Equipment	First Aid Kits	Kitchen Shelters	Food
Water Treatment	Maps	Reference Books	Camp Tools & Equipment Repair Kits

Packing List	
Clothing: Upper Body	
Hiking Shirt (1-2)	Most people prefer a long sleeve shirt for sun protection. A non-cotton shirt is best.
Warm Insulating Layers (2)	A few fleece jackets, wool sweaters, or puffy jackets that can be worn separately or layered for warmth. If in doubt, bring an extra. Especially in May and early June, be prepared to be outdoors in cold weather, with potential for light snow.
Rain Jacket	Waterproof rain jacket that fits over all your insulating layers.
Casual Camp Clothes	Around camp, it's nice to have some cotton clothes to relax in.
Sports Bra	Silk, wool, or synthetic.

Baseball Cap or Sun Hat	Sun protection is key for high elevation desert sun.
Wool or Fleece Hat	A warm hat is usually needed at night.
Fleece/Wool Gloves	Lightweight gloves. You might leave these out for the summer course.
Clothing: Lower Body	
Long Underwear	Lightweight wool or synthetic bottoms. Fleece or other warm pants can substitute for this.
Hiking Pants (1-2)	Durable, breathable, non-cotton pants that can handle walking off-train through brush.
Casual Camp Clothes	Around camp, it's nice to have some cotton clothes to relax in.
Underwear	Enough for a week. For hiking, synthetic or wool is usually preferred.
Footwear	
Hiking Shoes	Durable shoes or boots that can handle off-trail and on-trail hiking. We recommend approach shoes or light hiking shoes/boots. Waterproof footwear is not necessary, and tends to overheat at lower elevations. Please test new footwear before bringing it, as poor-fitting footwear causes blisters.
Hiking Socks	Wool or synthetic hiking socks provide cushion and prevent blisters.
Camp Footwear	Any kind of ordinary sneakers and socks. Sandals can be nice on warmer days.
Sleeping Gear	
Tent	A 1-3 person tent. Please practice setting up your tent before arriving if you aren't familiar with it.
Sleeping Bag	Rated to about 20°F (-6°C).
Sleeping Pad	This keeps you insulated from the cold mountain ground. Foam pads are an inexpensive and effective option.

Items For Collecting & Examining Plants	
Trowel, Digging Stick, or Hori Hori (optional)	For digging roots & examining soil.
Knife and/or Shears/Clippers	For cutting plants.
Hand Lens or Jeweler's Loupe (optional)	For close-up examination of plants, leaves, and flowers. Groundwork will have a few of these, but more is always better.
Paper or Cloth Bags	Small bags for collecting plants, berries, and mushrooms. Brown paper lunch bags work great, as do all sizes of cloth or net bags.
Drying Screens (optional)	If you have one, bring a small screen for drying plants on. For summer courses, fishing line and a large needle works well for stringing mushrooms up to dry.
Miscellaneous Items	
Day Pack	Large enough to carry all your things for long day hikes (30 liters is a good size).
Water Bottles (2)	Many people like to bring an insulated bottle or thermos to carry hot beverages on hikes. If you don't have one of those, bring a mug for hot beverages in camp.
Bowl	Ideally a tupperware with a sealing lid to carry meals on hikes.
Spoon	A personal eating utensil.
Journal & Pen/Pencil	For taking notes & making observations.
Art Supplies (optional)	For drawing or painting plants & landscapes.
Sunscreen/Lip Balm	SPF 30 or greater. At altitude, an SPF lip balm is nice.
Sunglasses	Eye protection at altitude is usually needed.
Toiletries	Please avoid single-use items like baby wipes—it's easy to stay clean with a washcloth/bandana, soap, and water. Please bring biodegradable soaps (Dr. Bronners, etc).

Watch (optional)	It can be nice to keep track of time if you're not using a phone.
Ground Pad / Camp Chair	A blanket, sheepskin, small foam pad, or a camp chair to sit on in camp and around the campfire.
Glasses & Contact Lenses	Bring spare glasses or contacts.
Towel	A household towel is fine.
Swimsuit	For courses later in the season, swimming may be an option.