

Wyoming Backpacking Adventure

Course Description

You're ready for an epic adventure in the Mountain West. You dream of scrambling up peaks, catching trout, and making snow cones in July. You're not afraid to work hard, get dirty, and learn hands-on skills with a group of your peers. If you're excited to spend a full month in the mountains making new friends and learning how to live in the wilderness, then this is the course for you.

Features

- Duration: 30 days
- Route length: approximately 80-100 miles
- Average group size: 10–12 students / 2–3 instructors
- Ages 14 and 15 only
- Average pack weight: 40-50 pounds
- Elevations of 7,000–13,000 feet
- Opportunity for students to travel in small groups independent of instructors (based on instructor discretion)
- On- and off-trail hiking near or above tree line
- Potential for rock climbing, snow travel, and/or peak ascents

Overview

This course takes place either in Wyoming's Bighorn or the Wind River Mountains. Both ranges are known for their granite peaks, wildflowers, and dramatic scenery. Designed for 14- and 15-year-olds, this course provides an excellent all-around introduction to mountain travel.

Your course will begin with basic skills: cooking and stove use, map reading, Leave No Trace practices, expedition behavior, and techniques for hiking and camping in grizzly bear habitat. The group will then move into more advanced topics, such as: leadership styles, effective communication and feedback skills, wilderness first aid, and navigation using a GPS and compass. Other skills that may be taught based on conditions, group interest, and instructor focus include: baking, fly-fishing, snow travel, climbing, geology, and plant identification.

You'll occasionally have a layover day to rest, enjoy a beautiful campsite, go on day hikes and other shorter adventures. In the Bighorn Range, you might try an ascent of

Bomber Mountain to investigate out the remains of a B-17 airplane that crashed during World War II, or attempt to climb Cloud Peak, the highest point in the range. In the Wind River Range, students often highlight climbing Raid Peak or fly fishing in high mountain streams.

During the course, you'll live with two or three other students in a "cook group". These small groups help disperse your impact on the land and help you learn backcountry living. On this course, tent groups are single gender, but cook groups might be mixed gender.

The emphasis of the leadership curriculum will be on experiential learning, though you'll also have some formal classes. A foundational course goal is building an inclusive community with your peers. Learning the value of teamwork, you will tackle group challenges and achieve common goals. As your group demonstrates strong interpersonal skills, your instructors will give you greater responsibility for leading yourself and your peers. By the end of this course, you'll have the technical and leadership skills to pursue your own backpacking trips in the wilderness.

Independent Student Group Travel

At the beginning of the course your instructors will travel with you to teach travel skills including navigation, leadership, risk assessment, and decision-making. As you develop competence, instructors will gradually give you more responsibilities. Once you gain proficiency and demonstrate competence to your instructors, you may travel in student-led groups without instructors for up to a day at a time—we call this independent student group travel.

Student Expedition

After successful practice with independent student group travel and if your instructors think your group is ready, your course may culminate in a multi-day student-led expedition. Usually, for the Student Expeditions you will travel in a group of four to six students independently of instructors for two to four days (depending on group competency, terrain, and route). This independent expedition caps off your NOLS experience and gives you a chance both to put into practice the skills you've learned and to appreciate the relationships you've formed with your expedition mates over the duration of your course.

Independent student group travel is carefully planned with your instructors and emergency plans are created for each group. Your instructors may be up to 24 hours away, but each group carries an electronic emergency communication device to alert

the NOLS emergency response system in the event of an accident. Ultimately, on this course you will develop the competence to travel independently in the wilderness and with your family and friends.

Weather and Other Challenges

Weather

Mountain weather is unpredictable. You'll learn to live comfortably outside in blizzards, rainstorms, and high winds. Cold and snowy conditions can occur any month of the year, and courses in May and June will spend some of their time camping on snow or using snowshoes to travel.

Terrain

You may be bushwhacking off-trail through thick vegetation, scrambling over refrigerator-sized boulders, or battling sleet. Rivers are icy from snowmelt and can be difficult or impossible to cross. You may have to traverse slopes of loose rock and carry a heavy backpack up steep passes.

Wildlife

The area your course will travel through is home to grizzly and black bears. NOLS, in collaboration with bear biologists, has developed specific practices to minimize the risk of a bear encounter. Your instructors will teach these practices to you and you will have to follow them every day. Bear avoidance practices include carrying bear deterrent pepper spray, meticulously maintaining cleanliness at the cooking sites, not having food in tents, and proper food storage. In some situations in grizzly bear country, the minimum group size is generally four people. You will live, travel and take care of personal necessities with a group of your peers always close by. Precautions against bear encounters will decrease the opportunities for solitude and privacy on this course, one of the most challenging aspects of living in grizzly bear country.

Remoteness

Identifying and managing the risks from hazards—such as falling rock, stormy weather, animals, moving water, and steep terrain—will be a constant theme on your course. You're often miles from the amenities of civilization, including medical care; telephones may be several days away. You are expected to demonstrate the highest regard for risk management in the field.

Learning Goals at NOLS

NOLS courses teach wilderness and leadership skills on expeditions and in classrooms. You will apply these skills to challenges in a supportive learning culture with high expectations. Your course will provide you with the opportunity for a positive, transformative experience intended to inspire you and empower you to act.

We craft NOLS courses so graduates will be able to assume leadership roles; live and travel in the outdoors; act with confidence and competence; respect and collaborate with others on expeditions, on teams and in communities; care for themselves and others; understand their strengths, habits, and areas for growth; function under difficult circumstances; make informed and thoughtful decisions; communicate effectively; connect with natural places; and appreciate living simply.

We believe positive, ethical leaders change the world. Join NOLS and become one of these leaders.