

Alaska Backpacking and Sea Kayaking Course Description

Immerse yourself in the rugged beauty of Alaska, where you'll paddle the wild coastlines and traverse remote mountain ranges. As you spot whales and porpoises in the ocean or keep an eye out for moose and wolves on land, you'll develop two invaluable wilderness skills—sea kayaking and backpacking—that will serve you for a lifetime of exploration. If you're ready to master both land and sea, this month-long expedition is the perfect fit for you.

Features

- **Duration:** 30 days (approx. 14 days backpacking, approx. 14 days sea kayaking)
- **Route length:** up to 150 miles
- **Average group size:** 12 students / 3 instructors
- **Average age:** 19 (except for 16- and 17-year-old courses)
- **Sea kayaking** in Prince William Sound
- **Backpacking** through tundra, shrub thickets, and gravel river bottoms
- **Wildlife** may include caribou, moose, Dall sheep, grizzly bears, wolves, whales, porpoises, and sea lions
- **Fishing:** season and route dependent
- **Participant weight limit:** 250 lbs (kayak weight-carrying capacity)

Overview

Alaska is a land of breathtaking fjords, forested ocean coasts, and expansive arctic tundra. This course offers the unique opportunity to experience two vastly different environments on foot and by sea kayak. Whether traversing remote mountain ranges or paddling along glacier-carved coastlines, you'll build the foundational skills to explore the wilderness confidently and independently.

Your expedition may start with either backpacking or sea kayaking, depending on the season. Whichever comes first, you'll begin with the essentials—camping, cooking, and wilderness travel skills—then progress to advanced techniques as you gain confidence and experience.

Sea Kayaking

- **Route length:** 75-120 miles
- **Watercraft:** single and double kayaks
- **Possible travel:** near tidal glaciers
- **Opportunities:** for day hikes and fishing for salmon, rockfish, and halibut (season-dependent)

This section will take place in the pristine waters of Prince William Sound or Kenai Fjords National Park, both renowned for their rich marine life and stunning scenery. Your kayaking journey will be more than just paddling—you'll observe and explore a diverse ecosystem teeming with whales, sea otters, and seals.

Your instructors will teach you essential kayaking skills, from paddle strokes and chart reading to wet exits and understanding ocean currents. Along the way, you'll also dive into topics like tides, weather patterns, and marine safety. Don't be surprised if you find yourself in a class on local geology, marine biology, or leadership and expedition behavior.

Land Acknowledgment (Sea Kayaking Section)

We recognize that our journey takes place in the traditional homelands of the Alutiiq, Chugach, and Eyak peoples, who have stewarded these lands and waters for thousands of years. Archaeological evidence, place names, and stories reflect the deep connection between these Indigenous communities and Prince William Sound, where traditional village sites and seasonal use areas are tied to the abundant resources of the region. Today, this land continues to hold great cultural, spiritual, and subsistence significance for Alaska Native peoples. We honor and respect their enduring relationship with this landscape.

Land Management (Sea Kayaking Section)

This section primarily operates on lands managed by the U.S. Forest Service within the Nellie Juan-College Fiord Wilderness Study Area, as well as on state land and in state parks. The Wilderness Study Area protects the region's wilderness character, ensuring it remains wild and pristine for future generations.

Backpacking

- **Route length:** 40-55 miles
- **Terrain:** on and off trail, with potential travel on boulders, scree, and snow
- **Elevations:** may reach 2,000-6,000 feet
- **Opportunities:** for non-technical peak ascents

- **Backpack weight:** 45-55 lbs

During the backpacking section, you'll navigate through some of Alaska's most remote and awe-inspiring mountains. Depending on your route, you may explore the rugged Talkeetna Mountains or the towering peaks of the Eastern Chugach Range. You'll learn off-trail navigation, river crossings, and how to traverse dense vegetation and loose scree. This section also includes techniques to minimize wildlife encounters and practice safe travel in bear country.

If conditions allow, you may have the chance to summit non-technical peaks or fish in remote alpine lakes and rivers. The backpacking section may include a mid-expedition resupply of food and fuel by bush plane.

Land Acknowledgment (Backpacking Section)

We acknowledge that our backpacking journey takes place in the traditional lands of the Ahtna and Dena'ina peoples, whose deep cultural connections to this region date back thousands of years. These mountains, valleys, and rivers have sustained their communities through countless generations. Today, the Talkeetna and Chugach mountains continue to be of great cultural and subsistence importance to the Ahtna and Dena'ina. We honor their enduring presence and respect their continued stewardship of these lands.

Land Management (Backpacking Section)

Our route crosses a mix of state land, Bureau of Land Management (BLM) land, and U.S. Forest Service land, including portions of the Talkeetna and Chugach mountains. These areas are managed to preserve the natural and cultural heritage of Alaska's wilderness, offering a remote and rugged landscape for exploration and discovery.

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.

Weather and Other Challenges

Weather

Given the latitude of these mountain ranges, 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. Prolonged storms can prohibit paddling for multiple days.

Terrain

Daily travel can be arduous. You will likely paddle in the rain and may paddle in windy conditions that require extended effort. 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 40-45% 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. In camp, you may encounter swarms of mosquitoes. Your body may take a little while to adjust and learn to sleep under the midnight sun.

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

There are no roads in this course area. Weather and other factors may prohibit or delay aircraft from flying or landing, which may delay a food re-ration or an evacuation of a sick or injured group member. Prudent route selection and continual adherence to risk management practices—a constant theme in our instruction—is how we manage the inherent risks of falling and rolling rock, falls on steep terrain, cold moving water, travel in snow and harsh weather. 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, beautiful mountains healthy and enjoyable.

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.