

Olivia Townsend Wilderness Blog Post- Purposeful Discomfort

Olivia is a member of the Caldwell Fellows class of 2026. She will begin as a first-year graduate student within the History Department at NC State in the Fall.

For the time I have been a Caldwell Fellow, I have heard stories of the annual Wilderness Expedition. Recollections of the difficulty and beauty of the backcountry have been a running thread through many conversations with other Fellows. While I enjoyed hearing my friends recount their experiences, I was certain I would never participate in the trials of Wilderness. Yet, within the last year, I have reflected on the confinement of my comfortability, the way it blocks me from the growth of novel experiences. And so, soon enough, I found myself on a flight with thirteen others headed to the expanse of the Sierra Mountains.

Intentionality

As we stood at the base of our five-day backpacking adventure, I stared at the booming snow-covered mountains as excitement and suspense pulsed through my veins. We suited up, threw the forty-pound backpacks over our backs, and began our journey. As we hiked the trail, I listed my intentions for the experience, reflecting on why I signed up in the first place. I wanted to confront my urge to stay within the boundaries of comfort, physically and mentally. I hoped to learn tangible wilderness skills. I sought to build or strengthen close bonds with others. Finally, I wanted to carve out time for personal meditation, a new tool I recently began exploring to ground myself mentally. The more I rolled these intentions over and over in my mind, the fewer people we saw on the trail, and soon, our small group became immersed in the wilderness.

I expected to be uncomfortable with this experience; this was the primary reason I pursued the Wilderness Expedition. However, outside of front country comforts (how I missed showering!), I began to experience an unanticipated form of discomfort: adaptability. I love having a plan, especially when that plan goes accordingly. However, the security of an established schedule is nearly impossible in the backcountry. There was more snow than we anticipated, and it soon swallowed the trails we followed. We stood on an expanse of white that continued for miles, and just as the secure trail bled into the vastness of the wilderness, I felt the boundaries of my comfort dissolve.

In the “Kitchen” of Community

The first few nights were rough. Everyone was cold, our socks were soaking wet, and the wind whipped fiercely as we huddled together in the “kitchen” (a few bare rocks where our portable stoves sat). Though those nights were difficult, we found ways to motivate and boost one another, sharing tips and tricks on how to stay warm, recounting funny happenings of the day, or complaining about the weather. These nights together in the “kitchen” were when I felt the most grounded. Centered in the wilderness and the beauty of our campsites, anchored to those with whom I shared meals, and rooted to the emotional impact of my surroundings. Together, in front of each other and the sweeping wilderness, we shared laughter and tears, our fears and our goals, and, as a team, we overcame our discomfort by building unshakeable relationships on a foundation of trust and shared experience.

Trust Your Fall!

The trust we had in one another and our fearless leaders, Pablo, Julia, and Rob, was built quickly over the days of our expedition. With no direct trail to follow, many of our hikes consisted of walking on weak snow, with unseen holes and slippery drops. To be prepared for potential falls, our trip leaders told us we would be enrolled in “snow school.” None of us knew what “snow school” involved, but it sounded fun. As we took a snack break, we watched Rob trek up a steep hill. Just as we confirmed amongst ourselves that he was attempting to find the trail, Rob flung himself down the hill, quickly grabbing his ice ax and digging into the snow to stop his fall. As he slid to the bottom, our leaders informed us that “snow school” had begun. For over an hour, we practiced falling and catching ourselves. Along with the tangible skill of breaking our falls, we learned to trust our capabilities and realized we could do this. We could hike in the deep snow without a trail, sleep in ten-degree weather, and catch ourselves if we fell.

Our “snow school” experience was soon put to the test as we mountaineered across a steep pass that towered over a frozen lake. Though our leaders trained us well, I was scared to fall, scared to look behind me, or to look down. I realized I only needed to look ahead. Our trust exercises proved I could trust those in front of me to make good steps, and I had an obligation to make them better for those behind me. Every step I took, I took a breath. I strictly focused on putting one foot in front of the other. My mind did not wander, and my breath flowed in tandem with the rhythm of my footsteps. We mountaineered for a long time, yet I continued in that rhythmic motion across the pass. When we arrived on the other side, I felt relief to be off the steep mountain, but also a sense of calmness across my mind and body. I looked forward and took in the view of mountaintops, clouds, and snow for miles and miles. My breath felt connected to my feet, and my feet felt grounded in the wilderness.

Final Reflections

It takes intention to partake in experiences of purposeful discomfort. Before this trip, I had never gone camping, let alone backpacking. I knew I would be uncomfortable, and I became dedicated to immersing myself in that feeling. You cannot grow within the confines of familiarity as you can by conquering novel experiences. Wilderness met all my intentions in ways I had not realized until reflecting on my time in the Sierra Mountains. I challenged and expanded my comfort zone, both physically and mentally. I acquired tangible skills and formed close bonds with those in our small group. I also found meditation present even at the scariest moments, like mountaineering. I'm thankful to have had the opportunity to grow in such exponential ways, and, while I may not miss sleeping in the snow, I think fondly of my time on the Caldwell Fellows Wilderness Expedition.