

Yellowstone Wilderness

Course Description

Take your summer vacation to backpack in some of the country's most remote wilderness in the Absaroka Range. Explore a land of turbulent rivers, windswept passes, and glacier-carved valleys as you develop lifelong leadership skills. If you're ready to unplug from city living for a while, to work hard and practice leadership in an amazing mountain range, then this is the course for you.

Features

- Duration: 30 days
- Route length: approximately 90 to 120 miles
- Average group size: 15 students / 3 instructors
- Elevations of 9,000–12,000 feet
- Average age: 19 / minimum age: 16
- Average pack weight: 45–60 pounds
- Opportunity for students to travel in small groups independent of instructors (based on instructor discretion)
- On- and off-trail hiking
- Grizzly bear habitat
- Area borders Yellowstone National Park
- Notable wildlife: deer, elk, moose, bighorn sheep, and grizzly and black bears

Overview

The Absaroka Range is famous for its sweeping forested mountains, unique geology, and diverse wildlife. You'll camp where elk roam and sparkling mountain streams tumble down from craggy peaks. The leadership and outdoor living skills you learn while exploring the Absarokas will serve you long after your course ends.

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, geology, and plant identification.

You'll travel in a small hiking group so you have more opportunities to lead, make decisions, and practice navigation as you move through the wilderness. You will occasionally have a layover day to rest, enjoy a beautiful campsite, or summit a peak.

Group dynamics and leadership are integral parts of your course's curriculum. 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. The emphasis of the leadership curriculum will be on experiential learning, though you'll also be exposed to formal classes. 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 five 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 or June will likely spend much 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.