

# Alaska Backpacking

## Course Description

Push yourself to explore a vast and beautiful landscape. Explore terrain that few people ever see, surrounded by endless tundra, near 24-hour daylight, and caribou herds. You'll become a seasoned wilderness traveler, learning how to read a map, navigate off trail, and scan the horizon for moose and Dall sheep. If you're seeking the opportunity to grow as a leader in one of the United States' biggest wildernesses, then this is the course for you.

### Features

- Duration: 30 days
- Route length: 90-150 miles
- Average group size: 14 students / 3 instructors
- Average age: Varies. Options include courses for ages 18-22 and courses for ages 16 and older.
- May reach elevations from 2,000-6,000 feet
- Travel through tundra, shrub thickets, gravel river bottoms, and possibly on boulders and through snow
- Off-trail hiking; some animal and ATV trails
- Opportunities for non-technical peak ascents
- Wildlife you may see: Dall sheep, moose, caribou, brown and black bears, wolves, wolverines and coyotes
- Fishing: season and route dependent
- Possibility for multi-day student expedition independent of instructors

### Overview

You will spend a month backpacking among the towering peaks and immense snow-covered summits that characterize Alaska's world-famous mountains. Possible destinations include the Talkeetna Mountains in southcentral Alaska, the interior Alaska Range, or the Wrangell-St. Elias Range along the U.S.-Canadian border.

Your course will begin with the basics, including camping, cooking and foundational mountain travel skills. Learning to live well and care for yourself, your fellow expedition members, your equipment and the environment is the focus of this course. You may cross large, glacier-fed rivers or negotiate slopes of loose scree and dense vegetation.

By the end of the expedition, you will have had numerous opportunities to practice the leadership and outdoor skills needed to plan and carry out your own backpacking trips.

## **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 2-6 days (depending on location). 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**

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.

### **Terrain**

Daily travel can be long and challenging. 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 45-55 lbs. 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 to sleeping 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 the 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 rock, falls on steep terrain, cold moving water, crevasses, avalanches 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.

## NOLS

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