



Expeditionary Western (“Alaskan”) Backpacking

Features of the Expeditionary Western Backpacking Trip

- Participants entering 12th. Minimum age: 17
- Group size: 4-6 participants and 2 leader
- 45 days backpacking in the Brooks Range of Alaska
- Hiking with a very heavy backpack most days for up to 12 hours
- On trail and off trail hiking, camping at undeveloped campsites
- Opportunities for day hikes
- Hiking up and down mountains in the arctic tundra

The Expeditionary Western (or Alaskan) is an intense 45-day backpacking trip in the Brooks Range of Alaska. The Alaskan involves crossing over large passes, scrambling across scree fields, crossing large rivers and walking through vast valleys. Trip groups may see glaciers, grizzly bears, dahl sheep, caribou and many mosquitos. This expedition starts at Manito-wish where groups will work on building their team, review skills such as river crossings, and pack food and gear. The group will then fly to Fairbanks, AK. From Fairbanks they enter the Brooks Range by plane or road. After the adventure the group will travel back to Manito-wish in order to close out their experience.

The Alaskan is an environmentally and physically challenging trip. The Brooks Range can experience multiple kinds of weather in a summer, including snow. Participants should have prior backpacking experience and their body should be in good condition to hike everyday. The packs on this expedition weigh 70-80 lbs. Back, knee, and ankle issues can often flare up under the extra weight and often do not heal in the field. Not only should participants be comfortable traversing difficult terrain, but they should have prior navigation practice and feel very comfortable in a backcountry environment. While on their expedition, participants will hone in their navigational skills in off trail environments, learn many intrapersonal skills, and will assess many different hiking risks such as river crossings and terrain changes.

The Brooks Range offers serene views and technical hiking that you cannot experience in the lower 48 states. The challenges of this trip create tight knit groups and take groups to places very few people have traveled.

What you will take away from the trip

The purpose of the trip is to develop group collaboration skills and leadership abilities including but not limited to humility, empathy, awareness, resourcefulness, resiliency, optimism, adaptability, and respect. Participants also gain exposure to wilderness skills including camping, hiking, and risk management, and explore the ecology of the area.

Each participant will practice giving and receiving feedback, reflecting on their leadership, camping skills, backpacking techniques, and working as a group to overcome challenges.

Leaders will teach these skills before gradually turning the leadership of the trip over to the participants. Each day participants will take over more of the daily responsibility of the trip.

Wilderness Skills

Wilderness skills involve camping, backpacking and Leave No Trace. These skills allow the participant to gain confidence and a level of comfort that make all of the above possible. Participants can expect to learn the following wilderness skills:

- Leave No Trace techniques
- Hiking skills: pace, posture, pack fitting, etc.
- Safe group travel and use of safety equipment
- Importance of equipment care
- Organization and packing of group and personal gear
- Route selection and terrain reading
- Map and compass reading
- Campsite selection and set up including tents and tarps
- Cooking meals independently including stove use and trail baking

Challenges of the trip

The Brooks Mountain Range offers many steep uphill and rocky challenges. This type of hiking is particularly hard on those with knee, back and ankle problems and it is not recommended to go on this trip if you have a history of these musculoskeletal issues.

These trips hike at various elevations, frequently going above 4000 to 6000 feet. Some people have issues adapting to the elevation changes and this is difficult to manage on the trip. Asthma or other respiratory issues can be exacerbated during strenuous hiking in dry, sometimes cold air.

Depending on the weather, bugs have the potential to be particularly fearsome on this trip. It is recommended that you bring lightweight long sleeve shirts and pants and be able to comfortably hike in buggy, hot conditions. Alternatively, the weather might be cold and stormy; groups have been caught in blizzards in the past.

Camp Manito-wish YMCA works hard to ensure that each trip leader has extensive experience in wilderness travel, youth development and risk management. For the success of the group, it is imperative that each participant has a positive attitude, makes conservative risk management decisions, works well with others who they do not get along with, and has a willingness to challenge themselves.

Time at Camp Manito-wish YMCA

The time spent at Camp allows the group to begin to form and prepare for the time spent on trail. They will have three full days of structured time in preparation of departure on the fourth full day. While at Camp, participants will be staying as groups in Smith Leadership Cabins. These cabins are furnished with bunkrooms, bathrooms and a common area with a kitchen.

The first day is spent introducing community standards and getting to know groupmates. During the next three days, the group will cover basic first aid and emergency procedures, pack their food and equipment, spend time on the low challenge course and go hiking to ensure that their equipment is in order. After these first days, groups will drive out West where they will begin their adventures!

Participant Expectations

We expect each participant to best support their group and their own growth by maintaining the following:

- Embraces challenges
- Make conservative risk management decisions
- Work productively with everyone in the community
- Sets personal goals leading to personal growth as relates to self-awareness
- Develops communication skills by identifying what appropriate communication in relation to needs, effectively communicating their own needs to the entire group and listening and understanding each individual's needs
- Accepts feedback by applying and discussing suggestions from others and gives feedback to others
- Create a safe and inclusive atmosphere
- Take initiative in group tasks and self care

Risk Management

Our participants are active players in risk management. Actively teaching and relying on participants for risk management minimizes injury and illness and we hope these skills translate to healthy decisions in areas outside of Camp. Objectives include:

- Recognize what group dynamics and how behavior within the group affects safety
- Understand the multitude of risks faced in the wilderness, be able to identify them and distinguish between healthy and unhealthy/unsafe risks
- Practice good personal hygiene, proper waste disposal and proper food handling situation
- Understand First Aid Kit contents and other safety equipment and be able to use basic supplies if necessary.