

# BACKPACKING: TALKEETNA MOUNTAINS



*Alaska Mountaineering School's (AMS) mission is to be the best source for wilderness and mountaineering expeditions in Alaska. On all of our programs we provide superior leadership, convey knowledge clearly and effectively, and instill lifelong appreciation for the wilderness environment. As a school, we provide excellence by offering hands-on education from our classroom—the remote wilderness of Denali National Park and Preserve. Our objective is to graduate safe and responsible mountaineers who understand all the mechanisms that result in a successful climbing expedition. We divide our core curriculum for mountaineering courses into four skill categories: Leadership, Wilderness Skills, Risk Management, and Stewardship and Sustainability. AMS's class progression and direct, personal approach bestow the confidence and competence for you to successfully pursue mountaineering for years to come.*

## THIS COURSE

---

AMS's Backpacking course is an unforgettable experience, where hikers find themselves surrounded by the vast and pristine alpine tundra of the Talkeetna Mountains. Alaska's wilderness is a national treasure, and AMS's courses are both educational and enjoyable ways to move among stunning scenery and pristine, photographic views of Denali and the Alaska Range, as well as learn about the unique tundra ecosystem underfoot. The Talkeetna Mountain Range is home to moose, caribou, Dall sheep, wolf, coyote, fox, wolverine, ermine, otter, porcupines, black and grizzly bear, ptarmigan, owl, ducks, loons, Canadian geese, swans and eagles. Backpackers will always keep a keen eye open to see these animals throughout the course. The AMS curriculum emphasizes essential wilderness skills to allow you to be safe and comfortable in a backcountry setting: tent setup, stove use, cooking, safe camping in bear country, basic knots, map and compass use, and first aid. Those with little to no backpacking or camping experience benefit from instruction on hiking techniques, camping skills, and map use. Natural history enthusiasts benefit from discussions on plant identification, animal sightings, and the human history of the region. Experienced backpackers will enjoy our flexible

schedule, as well as options to add more mileage, challenging terrain, and peak ascents to the itinerary. There is something in this course for anyone who enjoys being outdoors and immersed in the untamed beauty of the true Alaskan wilderness.

## SPECIFICATIONS

---

*Experience level:* Beginner

*Deposit:* \$500, due upon registration

*Course balance due:* 60 days prior to the starting date

*Group limit:* 8 students, 2 instructors, except for helicopter: 5 students: 1 instructor

*Tuition includes:* professional instructors; roundtrip transportation to the starting location from AMS; all food and team lunch at AMS headquarters on day one; bear sprays; air horn; all group camping equipment: tents, stakes, and tundra rigging; wilderness kitchen equipment: lightweight kitchen tent, stoves, pots, pans, utensils, fuel, bear-resistant food containers; wilderness communications: emergency-use satellite phone, VHF radio, Delorme in-Reach messaging; maps, compasses, GPS; remote medical protocols, first aid, medication, repair kits; fully equipped staging area and facilities at AMS HQ and AMS Mountain Shop in Talkeetna; course-long social media updates; luggage storage and free parking; camping at

AMS campground (tents are not provided); 10% discount at the AMS Mountain Shop; welcome-back table with fresh foods and drinks after your course; knowledgeable staff to assist with lodging and shuttle logistics.

*You are responsible for:* transportation to and from Talkeetna, Alaska; hotel lodging; trip health and travel insurance; personal clothing and equipment; and AMS equipment rentals.

---

## FEATURES

- 1:4 instructor/student ratio, up to 8 students
- Backpacking and camping skills for tundra and wooded environments
- Traveling and camping safely in bear country
- Leave No Trace camping and traveling techniques
- Wildlife viewing
- Understanding the ecosystem, identifying flora and fauna
- Optional peak ascent
- Elevations to 1,000–3,000 ft (900-1500 meters)
- River crossing, boulder and scree techniques
- Map and compass skills

---

## LEADERSHIP

AMS models and teaches leadership that is situational. You will learn different leadership styles that depend on specific situations, and see how important Expedition Behavior is to overall success. We teach a solution-oriented approach to conflict resolution, along with effective communication methods. You will develop a tolerance for adversity and uncertainty, as well as a clear understanding of both your strengths and potential areas for growth. These are critical for successful camping and backpacking. AMS teaches you how to be a leader as well as an active follower, and in doing so you will confidently balance the group's and your own personal goals.

---

## WILDERNESS SKILLS

AMS wilderness courses accessed via roadhead, helicopter, or bush plane with floats are self-reliant expeditions that travel within remote Alaskan wilderness where there are no physical amenities. Throughout the course, students learn to live safely in Alaska's forest, tundra and taiga environments, prepare their own meals, care for

themselves, and traverse diverse landscapes. The course format emphasizes hands-on learning and the application of new skills in a variety of terrains, and teaches self-reliance. AMS courses model hiking and camping techniques that prepare students to pursue backpacking in severe environments. *Please note: Due to weather and other circumstances in remote areas, evacuation to modern medical facilities can be difficult and may take up to several days.*

---

## RISK MANAGEMENT

AMS teaches you to consider and be aware of risks in everything you do, from lighting a stove to putting on your backpack, and wildlife encounters. By applying leadership, wilderness, and technical skills to hiking objectives you will learn to identify and assess hazards. AMS facilitates experiences that develop good judgement. On AMS courses, you will learn to assess and communicate decisions and actions, create and implement contingency plans, and make informed and thoughtful decisions.

---

## STEWARDSHIP AND SUSTAINABILITY

AMS strives to ensure that our wilderness values and environmental ethics are reflected in every aspect of our work. You will learn to apply Leave No Trace principles to all components of hiking, camping, and travel. This experience will help you develop your understanding of land-management and environmental issues. Through exploring the natural world and discussing its compelling geology, glaciology, ecology, and weather, you will come away with a depth of experience and understanding.

---

## LOCATION AND ACCESS

A few days prior to the start date, AMS instructors and managers will choose the specific location within the Talkeetna Mountains for the course. We look for pristine wilderness and good quality hiking routes suitable for teaching our backpacking progression. The exact location will depend on wilderness character, group goals, mode of access, hiking terrain and conditions.

Road access backpacking begin with a 2-hour van drive from AMS, in the north western Talkeetna Mountains, Denali State Park, or Peters Hills. Peters Hills, in the foothills of the Alaska Range features alpine tundra that borders both Denali State Park and Denali National Park and

Preserve. Denali State Park offers a narrow trail system within the alpine tundra, which allows us to cover more mileage in a breathtaking environment; and the Northern Talkeetna Mountains showcase trail-less terrain and remote alpine tundra ecosystems. All three areas, beautiful and well-known to AMS, ensure a high-quality experience with spectacular views, alpine lakes and animals viewing opportunities.

Helicopter transportation is provided by Talkeetna Air Taxi commercial helicopter service, in Robinson R44 II helicopters. These smaller 3-passenger aircraft can get us just where we want to be. Our 10- to 15-minute flight takes us into the Western Talkeetna Mountains and directly onto the alpine tundra, where we will land near a high alpine lake. We look for animals on our way to our camp spot and always land in areas that take full advantage of mountain views and excellent hiking routes.

Float plane access allow us to get into the central Talkeetna mountains and we arrange flights with local commercial float plane services in a Cessna 206 or 208. We have a few favorite remote alpine lakes to begin our fly-in backpacking courses. The areas we choose in the heart of the Talkeetna Mountains are near stunning rocky mountain spires, glaciers, clear streams, and high alpine tundra.

## SEASONS

---

June features road access locations with cooler temperatures and possible snow patches in the high tundra, which also means minimal encounters with insects. July to mid-August courses have warmer temperatures, bursting wildflowers, and insects— depending on the amount of breeze in the high terrain. Mid-August and early September courses bring cooler temperatures, fewer insects, ripening wild berries, and autumn colors. Expect tundra, alpine rocky peaks, and wooded vegetation for the duration of the course and be mentally prepared to encounter all types of weather.

## THE FIRST DAY

---

On the first day of the course, students and instructors meet at 8:00 a.m. at AMS. Your instructors will perform a thorough equipment check with you at this time, but not before. Anything you need will be issued to you; there is no need to reserve any rentals in advance. Any clothing

and equipment you do not need can be safely stored at AMS, including your vehicle. After the equipment check, we move into AMS's food room and pack lunches. At AMS everyone packs their own lunches with food they choose to eat from a vast assortment of available options. In the mountains where we are burning calories all day it is better to eat a little every hour throughout the day. The AMS food room resembles an organic grocery store and makes figuring out your lunches quick and efficient. When everything is checked and weighed, you eat a freshly prepared lunch at AMS.

## UNFLYABLE WEATHER

---

Alaska's weather is unpredictable and stormy, and occasionally prevents flying into or out of the mountains on schedule. In the event that courses are unable to fly into the mountains to begin on time, your instructors continue with their class progression at AMS's local hiking trails and indoor climbing gym. We will do our best to ensure that your course ends on schedule and most do. Still, we recommend allowing 2 days on the return end of your travel plans (and/or purchasing flexible airline tickets) in the event of delays. Please refer to the Travel and Logistics sheet for more information.

## INSTRUCTORS

---

AMS instructors love the Alaskan mountains and have a gift for backcountry travel, climbing, teaching, and guiding. Our instructors are talented climbers with extensive backcountry experience. Lead instructors have a wealth of experience climbing in the Alaska Range, as well as teaching mountaineering progressions. All of our staff is familiar with altitude-related problems and extreme weather, and they know how to set the pace for a successful course. Every one of them has mountain rescue, avalanche safety, Leave No Trace minimum impact certification, and Wilderness First Responder medical training. Their knowledge of the natural and climbing history of the area and their personal stories of climbing in Alaska add immensely to every program. Our guides and instructors represent a close group of educators and mountain guides with varied professional affiliations. *A note on certification:* Other than our own Mountain Guides Course, there is no available certification in the United States or

Europe that takes into account the expedition skills necessary to guide in the varied terrain and scope of the Alaska Range. AMS has developed a comprehensive training program for our field staff that includes a time-tested apprenticeship program, technical training, and evaluation system, which results in mountain guides with a depth of Alaska Range knowledge found only at AMS.

## FOOD

---

Food is vital to the success of any backcountry excursion. Learning what foods to bring and how to prepare them are essential skills taught on AMS courses. AMS's bulk rations facility allows us to maintain a high standard of food intake during our courses. AMS receives twice weekly deliveries of fresh food from Anchorage suppliers and deliveries of dried food from an organic distributor in Washington. Commercial freezers and refrigerators, bulk food bins, and custom-built rations tables with food scales line the walls. Large chest freezers have been converted into refrigerators to safely store field rations once they have been packed. No other company comes close to AMS's attention to detail and thoroughness when it comes to course and expedition food. No matter what your dietary requirements or preferences, AMS's food operation will be able to meet your needs.

## REFERENCES

---

AMS is a small, professionally run operation committed to high standards at all levels. Our history offering mountaineering courses and expeditions in Denali National Park and Preserve reaches back to 1983, and everything we do today is built from decades of hands-on experience. We urge you to do your due diligence and research Alaska Mountaineering School and its directors, Caitlin Palmer and Colby Coombs. Word of mouth is our greatest advertisement.

## COURSE GOALS AND OBJECTIVES

---

It is our goal for each student to accomplish objectives in the following areas:

### *Leadership*

- Display an understanding of instructors' decision-making processes through discussion and questioning

- Communicate effectively using words that remain respectful and inclusive of team members
- Demonstrate competence, make sound decisions, and display a tolerance for adversity and uncertainty

### *Wilderness Skills*

- Practice educated campsite selection, and build a fortified camp with tents and/or megamid shelters
- Live comfortably and learn efficient camping cooking, and personal hygiene skills
- Organize and take care of personal and group equipment

### *Risk Management*

- Manage the hazards of traveling and camping in bear country
- Recognize and prevent environmental injuries
- Display knowledge of personal limitations and the judgment to stay within them

### *Stewardship and Sustainability*

- Perform Leave No Trace minimum-impact living and traveling skills appropriate to a wilderness environment
- Familiarization with and concern for the conservation issues facing a wilderness environment

## SAMPLE BACKPACKING ITINERARIES

---

### **VAN ACCESS: Peters Hills: Basecamp with day hikes (July, early August, September)**

#### *Day 1*

Gear checks and lunch packing at AMS HQ. Drive 1.5 hours through an old gold mining community to our trailhead in the Peters Hills. Hike 3 miles on a narrow multiuse trail to our campsite, set up camp, and go for a short evening hike to get familiar with the area. Prepare to be awestruck by the in-your-face views of the Alaska Range. *Classes:* wildlife and bear awareness, bear spray use, campsite selection, tent setup, sleeping warm and dry, and camp hygiene.

#### *Day 2*

Wake up, cook breakfast, and pack for a day of hiking off-trail. *Classes:* natural history, Denali National Park, glaciology, bird and plant identification, movement over multiple types of terrain. Enjoy the incredible views.

### Day 3

Wake up, cook breakfast, and pack for a new day of hiking off-trail. *Classes:* navigation, map and GPS use, stream crossing, efficiency while moving and establishing camp.

### Day 4

Wake up, cook breakfast, and pack for a short hike away from camp for a few hours. Return to camp and pack up camp. Travel to the trailhead location. Roadside pickup in the afternoon. *Classes:* efficient packing and movement technique, planning a backpacking expedition, gear care and maintenance.

---

### **VAN ACCESS: Northern Talkeetnas: Point-to-point travel (June–early September)**

#### Day 1

Gear checks and lunch packing at AMS HQ. Drive 1.75 hours to the trailhead in the northern Talkeetna Mountains, Hurricane Gulch. Hike three off-trail miles to our campsite, set up camp, and go for a short evening hike to get familiar with the area. *Classes:* wildlife and bear awareness, bear spray use, campsite selection, tent setup, sleeping warm and dry, and camp hygiene.

#### Day 2

Wake up, cook breakfast, and pack up for a short move to our next camp, at an alpine lake. Hiking off-trail. Watch for caribou. *Classes:* natural history, glaciology, bird and plant identification, cooking, stove use, movement over multiple types of terrain. Enjoy the incredible views.

#### Day 3

Wake up, cook breakfast, and pack up for a move to our next camp, in the tundra at another high alpine lake. Hiking terrain includes: off-trail tundra, river crossing, and wild game trails. Keep an eye out for wolves. *Classes:* navigation, map and GPS use, stream and river crossing, efficiency while moving and establishing camp.

#### Day 4

Pack up camp and travel toward the pickup location. Spend a full day hiking off-trail out of the mountains through different ecosystems. Roadside pickup in the mid-afternoon, about 3:00 p.m. *Classes:* efficient packing and movement techniques, planning a backpacking expedition, gear care and maintenance.

---

### **FLOAT PLANE: Sheep Back Lake, Talkeetna Mountains (July–August)**

#### Day 1

Gear checks in town, lunch, fly to Sheep Back Lake. Establish a campsite near the lake and go for a short hike to get familiarized with the area. *Classes:* on wild animal and bear awareness, bear spray use, campsite selection, tent setup, sleeping warm and dry, and camp hygiene.

#### Day 2

Wake up, cook breakfast, and pack up camp with for a day of hiking for 5 miles on trail-less terrain. Camp on tundra among granite spires. *Classes:* on natural history, glaciology, bird and plant identification.

#### Day 3

Wake up, cook breakfast, and pack up camp with for a day of hiking for 5 miles on trail-less terrain along a glacier. Terrain is strenuous: loose rocky and tundra. Camp near alpine lake on tundra. *Classes:* navigation, map and GPS use, glacier hazard recognition, movement over multiple types of terrain, stream and river crossing.

#### Day 4

Wake up, cook breakfast, and pack up camp for a 4-mile hike to return to Backside Lake for a mid-afternoon pickup. Hiking on trail-less tundra. *Classes:* efficient packing and movement technique, planning a backpacking expedition, gear care and maintenance.

---

### **VIA HELICOPTER: elevation 2,500 ft. Alpine Tundra Lakeside, Talkeetna Mountains (July–August)**

#### Day 1

Gear checks in town, lunch, fly to the Talkeetna Mountains. Keeping an eye open for wildlife on the flight. Establish a campsite and go for a short hike to get familiarized with the area. *Classes:* wildlife and bear awareness, bear spray use, campsite selection, tent setup, sleeping warm and dry, basic stove use, and camp hygiene.

#### Day 2

Wake up, cook breakfast, and pack for a day of day hiking, enjoy the views watch for caribou. *Classes:* natural history,

glaciology geology, bird and plant identification, movement over multiple types of terrain.

*Day 3*

Pack up camp and move to a new location in the higher alpine tundra of the Talkeetna Mountains. *Classes:* navigation, map and GPS use, stream and river crossing, efficiency while moving and establishing camp.

*Day 4*

Pack up camp and move gear to the same landing zone for pickup. Spend the rest of the day hiking and exploring the area around the landing zone. Helicopter pickup in the afternoon. *Classes:* efficient packing and movement technique, planning a backpacking expedition, gear care and maintenance.