

BACKPACKING: TALKEETNA MOUNTAINS, NORTHERN ALPINE TRAVERSE



Alaska Mountaineering School's (AMS) mission is to be the best source for wilderness and mountaineering expeditions in Alaska. All of our programs provide superior leadership, convey knowledge clearly and effectively, and instill a lifelong appreciation for the wilderness environment. As a school, we provide excellence by offering hands-on education from our classroom—the remote wilderness of the Alaska Range and Talkeetna Mountains. Our objective is to graduate safe and responsible mountaineers who understand all the mechanisms that result in successful expeditions. We divide our core curriculum for 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 wilderness travel for years to come.

THIS COURSE

An AMS 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. Our courses are educational and enjoyable ways to move among stunning scenery and pristine 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, grizzly and black bear, and other small mammals, as well as ptarmigan, ducks, loons, Canada geese, swans, and eagles. The AMS curriculum emphasizes essential wilderness skills 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 region's human history. Experienced backpackers will enjoy our flexible schedule and options to add more mileage, challenging terrain, and peak ascents to the itinerary. This course has something for anyone who enjoys being outdoors and immersed in the untamed beauty of the true Alaskan wilderness.

SPECIFICATIONS

Experience level: You should arrive at the course with some basic camping and hiking experience.

Fitness: You need to be fit, not a competitive athlete, but have good stamina for all-day outings and be able to carry a backpack weighing 35-40 lbs.

Deposit: \$500, due upon registration

Course balance due: 60 days prior to the starting date

Group limit: 6 students, 2 instructors

Tuition includes: professional instructors; roundtrip transportation to the starting location from AMS; all food and team lunch at AMS headquarters on day one; all group camping equipment: tents, and tundra rigging; wilderness kitchen equipment: lightweight kitchen tent, stoves, pots, pans, utensils, fuel, and bear-resistant food containers. Bear sprays and air horns. Communications: emergency-use satellite phone, Delorme in-Reach messaging; maps, compasses, GPS; remote medical protocols, first aid, medication, repair kits; fully equipped staging area and facilities at AMS Headquarters; luggage storage and free parking; camping at AMS campground (tents/sleeping bags are not provided); 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, if needed.

FEATURES

- 2:6 instructor/student ratio, up to 6 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
- Map and compass skills
- Elevations to 1,000–3,000 ft (900-1500 meters)
- River crossing, boulder and scree techniques
- Optional peak ascent

LEADERSHIP

AMS models and teaches situational leadership. 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 and effective communication methods. You will develop a tolerance for adversity and uncertainty and a clear understanding of 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 personal goals.

WILDERNESS SKILLS

AMS wilderness courses accessed via road-head, helicopter, or bush plane with floats are self-reliant expeditions that travel within remote Alaskan wilderness without 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

terrain and teaches self-reliance. AMS courses model hiking and camping techniques that prepare students to pursue backpacking in severe environments.

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 to 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 judgment. You will learn to assess and communicate decisions and actions, create and implement contingency plans, and make informed and thoughtful decisions. *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.*

WEATHER

July courses have warmer temperatures, bursting wildflowers and insects - depending on the amount of breeze in the high terrain. Expect tundra, rugged alpine peaks, alpine tundra and brushy vegetation for the duration of the course, and be mentally prepared to encounter all types of weather.

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 hiking, camping, and travel components. This experience will help you develop your understanding of land management and environmental issues. By exploring the natural world and discussing its compelling geology, glaciology, ecology, and weather, you will come away with a depth of experience, understanding, and appreciation.

LOCATION AND ACCESS

A few days before 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 begins with a 2-hour van drive from AMS, in the northwestern Talkeetna Mountains, Denali State Park. The Northern Talkeetna Mountains showcase trail-less terrain and remote alpine tundra ecosystems. Beautiful and well-known to AMS, this area ensures a high-quality experience with spectacular views, alpine lakes, and animal viewing opportunities.

THE FIRST DAY

Students and instructors meet at 8:00 a.m. at AMS on the first day of the course. Your instructors will perform a thorough equipment check with you at this time. Anything you need can be rented; 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 pack lunches in AMS's food room. Everyone packs their own lunches with the food they choose from our large assortment of available options. The AMS food room resembles a grocery store, making figuring out your lunches quick and efficient. Next, we eat a freshly prepared lunch at AMS. After lunch, we load the van and drive to the trailhead.

FOOD

What to eat and how to cook it is vital to the success of any multi-day backcountry expedition. Just as important as packing your backpack, having a good kitchen set up with the right food will make or break an expedition. You will learn how to prepare tasty, nutritious, and hearty meals. We know that looking forward to breakfast and knowing what to do is a good way to start each day. Just as looking forward to dinner helps us push to the finish line. We have a section of our food packing room devoted to gluten-free, dairy-free, and wheat-free products. Please contact AMS to ensure we can accommodate specific dietary needs.

INSTRUCTORS

AMS instructors love the Alaskan mountains and have a gift for hiking, climbing, teaching, and guiding. They are attracted to AMS because we prioritize education over guiding as a school. Our format and curriculum can only be taught by well-rounded people in many aspects of the outdoors. Our instructors know how to set the pace for a successful course. Each has mountain rescue, avalanche safety, Leave No Trace minimum impact certification, and Wilderness First Responder medical training. Their knowledge of the area's natural history and their personal stories of recreating in Alaska add immensely to every program. 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 competent, engaging, and successful instructors with a depth of Alaska Range knowledge found only at AMS.

REFERENCES

AMS is a small, professionally run operation committed to high standards at all levels. Our history of 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 ITINERARY

VAN ACCESS: Northern Talkeetnas, Northern Alpine Traverse

Day 1

Gear checks and lunch packing at AMS HQ. Drive 2 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, and movement over multiple types of terrain. Enjoy the incredible views.

Day 3-5

Wake up, cook breakfast, and pack up for our next camp, in the tundra at another high alpine lake. Hiking terrain includes off-trail tundra, river crossings, and wild game trails. *Classes* include navigation, map and GPS use, stream and river crossing, and efficiency while moving and establishing camp.

Day 6

After breakfast, hike a peak in the local area. *Classes* on efficient packing and movement technique, minimizing risk in steep terrain, movement over scree, environmental injuries, and self-care.

Day 7

Day hike a loop around your camp, ascending alpine passes and small peaks along the way. *Classes* on bird and plant identification, natural history, and glaciology.

Day 8

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, with transport back to AMS Headquarters. *Classes:* efficient packing and movement techniques, planning a backpacking expedition, gear care and maintenance. Return to Talkeetna greeted with a welcome-back table with fresh fruit and drinks. De-issue gear.