

Backpacking Standards

This standard applies to Mountaineers sponsored backpacking trips on established routes longer than two (2) miles round trip. This standard applies to any committee sponsoring Backpacks, and Youth & Family Backpacks, whether as part of a course or not.¹

TRIPS

Mountaineers backpacking trips may include:

- Travel on maintained and unmaintained trails, paths or routes.
- Travel on steep, rocky, or uneven terrain on or off trail where exposure is such that a fall resulting in serious injury would be unlikely. Hands may be needed for balance or to navigate obstacles, but not for sustained climbing.
- Terrain of technical T2 and below.²
- Off-trail routes of any length/duration as long as they are within the above guidelines. Leaders and participants on extended off-trail routes should have the Wilderness/Off-Trail Navigation Badge or equivalent, and experience navigating off-trail.
- Travel on snow- or ice-covered routes, unless the route exposes the party to terrain with avalanche hazards or snow-covered terrain traps, or where a slip could result in an extended uncontrolled slide such that ice axes are required for safety. Microspikes and trekking poles may be used within the standard.

Other Notes:

- If snowshoes are required for efficient travel on extended parts of the route, then special snow skills and training for the leader and participants is important for safety. Such routes that require snowshoes should not be led solely as backpacking trips.

Travel in which participants run for any significant portion of the trip is considered a trail run and must follow the Activity Standards for Trail Running. These trips may not be posted solely as a hike or backpack.

DEFINITIONS

Backpacking trips include an overnight stay where participants carry in their shelter, food and water. Cell phone service in these locations may or may not be reliable. When the backpack trip is designed for youth clubs, outreach programs, or camps, it is a Youth Backpack. When the backpack trip is designed for

¹ Some committees sponsor backpacking activities that adhere to other relevant standards. For example, a component of an overnight Alpine Climb includes backpacking, but Climbing Committees adhere to the Clubwide Activity Standards for Climbing. Similarly, some Scramble Committees sponsor Scramble Conditioners, which meet the Clubwide Activity Standards for Scrambling (which include a Scramble Conditioner designation)

²Mountaineers technical level T2 includes on-trail or off-trail terrain that is steep, rocky, or uneven to the extent that use of hands may be needed for balance or to navigate obstacles, but not for sustained climbing. Mountaineers technical level T3 terrain involves sustained travel on rocky terrain where hands are routinely required for upward or downward progress, whether on- or off-trail, and/or that includes exposure where a fall is likely without special skills and that is likely to lead to significant injury in case of a fall. Some routes are already classified on the Mountaineers website as T3, and we are advised not to post hikes or backpacks on those routes. There are mechanisms to challenge those ratings for a given route – check with your committee chair.

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families (children plus guardians), it is a Family Backpack Trip. Youth and Family Backpack trips may occur in spaces that are atypical for Backpacking for the purpose of creating positive experiences for the participants

DIFFICULTY RATINGS

The overall Difficulty Rating of a multi-day backpacking route or trip shall be that of the most difficult day, where the difficulty of each day is rated using the scale below as a general guide. The trip's rating must be entered on the activity listing with the total trip distance and elevation gain communicated to participants in pre-trip communications. Leaders are encouraged to also include the distance and gain for each day of the trip in the activity posting and communication with participants.

The rating guide for each day of a trip is:

- Easy (E): Up to 8 miles and up to 1200 feet of elevation gain round trip.
- Moderate (M): Up to 12 miles and up to 2500 feet of elevation gain round trip.
- Strenuous (S): Up to 14 miles and up to 3500 feet of elevation gain round trip.
- Very Strenuous (VS): Over 14 miles or over 3500 feet of elevation gain round trip.

The rating for the day shall be the lowest rating that satisfies both the distance and elevation gain criteria. For example: a day with 11 miles of distance and 1000 ft of gain would be a Moderate day.

LEADER RATING

In addition to the route difficulty, a Leader Rating must be specified for each activity. This provides the leader with a way to modify the baseline route difficulty based on specifics of how they will lead the trip or for a backpack. The following are examples of criteria a leader may consider in setting the Leader Rating.

- Casual: Average pace under 1 mph and no technical challenges or special skills needed.
- Easy: Average pace 1-1.5mph and no technical challenges or special skills needed
- Moderate: Average pace 1.5-2mph OR an easy route with an overnight pack, or some route challenges (e.g. rough trail, log crossings, steep terrain)
- Challenging: Average pace >2mph OR a moderate route with an overnight pack, OR significant route challenges or skills requirements (e.g. fixed ropes, very rugged terrain, steep scree descents, snow or ice crossings; camping on snow, bear canister requirement, carrying water to a dry camp)

It is recommended that the leader clearly specify the distance and elevation gain for the route as well as their planned pace, any special technical challenges and special gear, skills and conditioning requirements of the trip in the trip posting within the activity summary and/or the leaders' notes.

PARTY SIZE

The minimum party size for a Backpack is three (3) and the maximum party size is twelve (12) unless other party limits apply. Capacity decisions need to be in alignment with [The Mountaineers Outdoor Ethics Policy](#).

LEADER QUALIFICATIONS FOR BACKPACKING TRIP LEADERS

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There are two (2) Leader types in Backpacking: 1) Backpack Leader and 2) Youth & Family Backpack Leader. All leaders must meet Key Elements 1-6 in order to qualify as a Leader. Youth and family backpack leaders have additional and/or different requirements as described below. Distinct badges are awarded for leader types and are not interchangeable.

All leaders must be Mountaineers members, at least 18 years old, with an up-to-date waiver on file. New leaders are strongly encouraged to go on a minimum of three (3) relevant backpacking trips with The Mountaineers, preferably with different leaders, before becoming a leader themselves. Individual committees have the discretion to require more or fewer activities based on the applicant's experience and skills. Relevant means Adult Trips for Backpacking Leader, and Youth Trips for Youth & Family Leader.

Leaders must be approved to lead backpacks by a Mountaineers branch Backpacking Committee, and entered on their committee's leader list. Once approved by one branch, a leader may request to be added to another branch's backpacking committee's leader list. The committee chair of the requested branch has discretion whether to approve or deny leaders and/or to require that the leader complete any additional requirements before being added to the roster.

Leaders must demonstrate basic competency in each of the following key elements before being approved to lead a Mountaineers backpack. Under each key element, bullets highlight examples of the skills, behaviors, or knowledge factors expected of a Mountaineers backpack leader within that element.

KEY ELEMENT 1: Group Leadership – examples of expected competencies

- Planning and organization
- Screening of participants (as appropriate)
- Communication (clear and effective)
- Ensures that all party members are accounted for periodically and at the trip conclusion
- Respectful, caring, considerate
- Sound judgment and decision-making skills
- Establishes trust
- Focuses on group well-being and success as a whole
- Adapts as required / situational leadership
- Teaches / coaches and also learns from others

KEY ELEMENT 2: Technical Skill – examples of expected competencies

- Has experience and physical abilities commensurate with the trip being led
- Practices Minimum Impact Procedures / Leave No Trace 7 Principles
- Practices good Trail Etiquette
- Knowledge and use of 10 Essentials

KEY ELEMENT 3: Navigation– examples of expected competencies

- Effectively navigates trail routes with map and compass and any other appropriate tools to “stay found” (altimeter, watch, GPS)

KEY ELEMENT 4: Mountain Safety Skills– examples of expected competencies

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- Shows good understanding of major summer and winter backcountry hazards and how to assess the level of risk
- Shows good understanding of methods to prevent, mitigate or manage major risk factors

KEY ELEMENT 5: First Aid and Emergency Preparedness – examples of expected competencies

- Able to handle common first aid situations likely to be experienced on a hike
- Know the “7 steps of Emergency Response” as described in [Mountaineering: Freedom of the Hills](#), or an equivalent emergency management process
- Exhibits a good understanding of how to handle emergency situations such as lost hiker/off route/lost
- Demonstrates problem solving and leadership skills relating to medical emergencies or unexpected weather and trail conditions
- Knows how to communicate /summon help

KEY ELEMENT 6: Knowledge of Standards and Policies– examples of expected competencies

- Familiar with applicable Mountaineers standards or procedures such as carpools; liability; waivers, postings and closings; ratings
- Knows Incident reporting expectations
- Familiar with maximum group size, permitting, camping, food storage, and other applicable land management agency regulations

LEADER QUALIFICATIONS - YOUTH & FAMILY BACKPACK LEADER

- Key Elements 1-6
- Earn The Qualified Youth Leader Badge (which includes the Qualified Youth Leader General Training and a Criminal Background Check administered through The Mountaineers).
- Once a Leader has earned the Qualified Youth Leader Badge they may complete the Qualified Youth Leader program specific skill badge training for the youth program they wish to lead for. Candidates can receive a badge corresponding with the training(s) they complete. Five options include:
 - Family Activities
 - Kids Clubs
 - Teen Clubs
 - Outreach
 - Camps

PROCESS TO QUALIFY AS A MOUNTAINEERS BACKPACK, OR YOUTH & FAMILY BACKPACK LEADER

Sponsoring committees must have a documented and transparent process, available to any interested member, by which a prospective leader can qualify as a Mountaineers backpack leader, or Youth & Family Backpack Leader, if the activity is in the scope of the committee (included in the committee’s charter) Committees are responsible to verify that prospective leaders are competent in the key elements listed above using a structured, objective method. The following are examples of avenues that could be used:

- Data from application form and/or activity /course history

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- Other leader badges (e.g. Climb or kayak leader or other)
- Possess current badges for each of the following: Wilderness First Aid or higher, On-trail Navigation (aka “Staying Found”) or Off-trail Navigation (aka Wilderness Navigation) or equivalent external class appropriate for the planned route
- Backpack Leader or combined leader seminar or equivalent for example:
 - Take home test following leader seminar or as an “equivalency” in lieu of seminar
 - Structured interview with Committee Chair or designate to validate knowledge
- Successfully completing a mentored trip during which the mentor evaluates the prospective leader on a relevant trip against the standards to the degree possible³ A relevant trip includes a youth backpack for the Youth Backpack Leader Badge, or an adult backpack for the Backpack Leader Badge.

Committees have flexibility to use different combinations of the above methods appropriate to individual leader candidates, maintaining flexibility to recognize experience and training from another activity or from outside the club where it directly applies to the key leader competency requirements.

However, the committee must maintain a mechanism to document their evaluation of a leader candidate against the key criteria so that any outside party can understand the objective method used to qualify the person.

It is strongly recommended that each backpack leader attend a backpack leader seminar or combined leader seminar including an overview of the standard and all the key leader criteria and expectations, even if they have led other activities for the Mountaineers. Because backpacks have no prerequisites, backpack leaders often have to face much greater challenges in screening participants, ensuring basic preparedness, providing first aid and navigation expertise for the group, and managing safety and pace during the activity than leaders of many other activities that have significant prerequisites for participation.

Upon review of the prospective leader’s completion of the requirements, the sponsoring committee may grant the applicant a Backpack Leader Badge or Youth & Family Backpack and add them to their committee’s backpack leader roster, which authorizes them to post and lead Mountaineers Backpacks, or Youth & Family Backpacks.

PARTICIPANT QUALIFICATIONS

Prerequisites for signing up for a backpack vary by trip type:

- Open Backpacks: Unless specified by the leader, there are no prerequisite badges.
- Basic Backpacks: Participants must have one of the following badges: Basic Backpacking Course, Basic Backpacking Course Student, Basic Backpacking Skills. Unless specified by the leader there are no additional prerequisite badges.

Leader Permission is optional for both trip types.

³ In general, it is assumed that the holder of a Youth & Family Backpack Leader Badge will not be granted reciprocity for a Backpack Leader Badge. Because the different audiences require a substantially different skillset, committees are strongly encouraged to require a relevant mentored trip for a prospective leader seeking transition between Youth & Family and standard Backpack Leadership.

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Participants are responsible for signing up only for trips that are within their capabilities, wearing suitable clothing / bringing suitable equipment as specified by the leader, and carrying the ten essentials.

RELATED CLUBWIDE STANDARDS

- General Standards for All Club Activities
- Comparable Standards
- UIAA Standards for Voluntary Leaders and Instructors, October 2006
 - Activity Standard 1: Mountain Walking and Trekking
 - Leadership Requirements and Guidelines; Appalachian Mountain Club, March 15, 2015

BADGE CRITERIA

Backpacking Skills Badges

Anyone desiring a Backpacking Skills badge needs to submit a request for the badge in writing to their branch's backpacking chair, along with all of their pre-requisite experience – unless the badge is directly awarded from a backpacking course or clinic. That chair then has the lead responsibility to review the applicant's information, follow up as needed, and make the decision to grant the appropriate badge, assuring that the qualifications are met.

Basic Backpacking Skills

This badge documents that the holder has the core knowledge and skills to participate in “basic” backpacking trips that do not present unusual technical or physical challenges. Specific trips may require additional skills, gears, or training at the discretion of the trip leader.

Grant this badge if the applicant can demonstrate that they’ve acquired the following basic backpacking knowledge and skills, either through lectures/seminars or equivalent experience.

- Wilderness Fundamentals:
 - The Ten Essentials
 - Hiking Safety, Leave No Trace, and Trail Etiquette principles
- Knowledge of core backpacking gear and skills:
 - Additional Etiquette and Leave No Trace principles relevant to backpacking: food storage, keeping a clean camp, trail and camp behavior, interacting with wildlife, use of fire.
 - Choosing a backpack
 - Choosing a tent or other form of shelter.
 - Footwear: Boots, hiking shoes, trail runners – how to choose based on the trip
 - Choosing the right clothing; layering concepts
 - Staying comfortable while backpacking in wet weather: rain jacket or poncho, pants or skirt; pack cover, pack liner concepts; gaiters; keeping your gear dry
 - Hydration, carrying water, purifying water
 - Food: Backpack food options, basics of how to obtain and/or prepare your backpack food, how much food to carry, calorie density, how to package and carry food
 - Mealtime: Stove and fuel options, fuel efficiency, pots, dishes and utensils, etc.
 - Food storage: Various options and their pros and cons

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- Sleep system: basic sleeping bag/quilt options and how to decide, sleeping pad options and how to decide, night-time clothing; how to consider your whole sleep system
- Misc: Light, camp/water shoes, gaiters, first aid gear for backpacking
- How to pack a backpack.
- Choosing the type of backpacking trip that suits your style, experience and conditioning:
 - Types of trips: basecamp trips, through-hikes, short vs. longer, relaxed vs. intense, etc.),
 - Pacing and daily distance
 - Special considerations such as wet, cold, or hot weather conditions, water crossings.
 - Pack weight (base weight and total weight), balancing trail and camp comfort, knowing the weight of your gear and bringing only what you need for the conditions (using a checklist)
- Personal preparations for a backpacking trip:
 - How to find info on expected weather and trail conditions.
 - Choosing appropriate gear and clothing for a specific trip.