



SINCE 1969 THE NATIONAL OUTDOOR LEADERSHIP SCHOOL HAS TESTED ITS STUDENTS ON BACKCOUNTRY TRIPS, FROM IDAHO TO THE HIMALAYAS, ALASKA TO PATAGONIA. BUT THE ADIRONDACKS PROVES TO BE THE ULTIMATE WILDERNESS CLASSROOM

PATH FINDER S

BY BRIAN MANN
PHOTOGRAPHS BY
JOHNATHAN ESPER

IT'S A

luminous autumn day and Kyle Drake climbs a slope of Dial Mountain in the Dix Mountain Wilderness Area, threading through crimson-leaved witch hobble, navigating tangles of bronze ferns, fallen trees and tumbled rock. He wears a pair of blue gym shorts, a trim black beard and ball cap, and carries a backpack the size of a college-dorm refrigerator.

Every so often he pauses, shifting his shoulder straps and looking over the slope with a shepherd's eye. "OK, gather 'round!" he calls to his hiking group. "Let's have some water and look at the map and compass." Kyle is 34, a veteran instructor with the National Outdoor Leadership School (NOLS), headquartered in Lander, Wyoming, where he lives.

Four men and women scramble wearily toward him through dense brush, looking grateful for a break. "There's no trail," says Jess Stapleton, sounding a little baffled at finding herself in a place where there's literally no trace of civilization, not even a footpath. "We're walking this ridgeline, pushing trees out of the way."

She's 25, athletic, a fairly experienced hiker and camper from Knoxville, Tennessee. But this is different, bigger and wilder. She and her fellow NOLS students are on a nine-day trip into some of the rawest terrain in the eastern U.S., their only comforts the ones they carry on their backs. "You get pushed to the point of almost losing it," says LeAnn Turner, from Berkeley, California. She's 31, grew up in the suburbs and never had any interest in the outdoors until a few years ago.



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During their nine-day backpacking trip, NOLS students from all over the country learn navigation and other outdoor skills as they trek 45 miles through the High Peaks. "It can be mentally exhausting," says instructor Kyle Drake. "There's value in the experience of things that are hard and emotionally taxing."

"You're standing in the midst of dense woods, looking in every direction, not knowing which way you should go or where the ground will fall out from under you," she says.

While resting, the group takes in a quick lesson on backcountry navigation, with Kyle explaining the difference between true north (that's the pole) and magnetic north (located near Ellesmere Island, in northern Canada). He holds out the map and points through the canopy of glittering maple and birch at a distant spur of Bear Den Mountain, showing how to take an accurate bearing.

"I was surprised by the Adirondacks, how steep it is out here," he admits, drawing his finger over the map's dense contour lines. "It looks like this last little bit could be a little bit heinous."

His students groan as they start upward again, but there's a method at work here. Kyle's job is to make sure these travelers—many of them brand-new to the outdoors—make the journey safely. But it's also his mission to let them do most of the navigation and hard work themselves, while helping them stay mindful of what they're doing, taking in the rare experience of moving through deep wilderness.

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His students have come to the Adirondacks from all over the country, bending





the curve of busy modern lives and spending thousands of dollars to find exactly this kind of experience. This is important: They haven't signed up for a comfy camping trip or a quick, glampy sort of holiday. NOLS promises real wildness, deep remoteness and solitude. When they talk about their reasons for being here, it sounds more like a kind of pilgrimage, a yearning they're still trying to understand.

"I'm not sure what drew me to it," LeAnn says. "I just really think nature is therapeutic. It's refreshing to step away from phones and laptops and Netflix once in a while."

The National Outdoor Leadership School was founded in 1965 by legendary mountaineer Paul Petzoldt. Over the decades, the nonprofit built a reputation as one of the premier organizations in the world using wild landscapes in a deliberate way as a classroom. Guides like Kyle teach outdoor skills, environmental consciousness, and leadership techniques to small groups like this one and also to corporate leaders from organizations like Google and NASA.

NOLS typically mounts big expeditions in the wildest corners of Alaska and Idaho, also offering month-long programs in places like the Himalayas and Patagonia. But in the last

eight years, NOLS has quietly built a new presence here in the Adirondacks. "I think this place surprises people," says Lindsay Yost, who has led the group's Northeast program since 2011. "They don't know that in upstate New York this vast wilderness exists. Or if they knew about it, they experience it with us in a totally new way, carrying everything on their backs, traveling over mountains."

Lindsay says NOLS chose the Adirondacks over the Whites and the Green Mountains because the wilderness is more expansive and there are paddling opportunities as well as hiking. She herself grew up spending summers with her family in Lake Placid. After college, when she devoted herself to outdoor education, she had to relearn the Adirondack Park, searching for landscapes that would be a good fit for NOLS-scale outings.

"I thought I knew it, but I didn't. I learned so much, how vast it is. We're

using the mountains and water to help students grow and gain independence and learn about themselves," she says.

So far it's worked. Her first year running the program, NOLS offered just three trips in the Adirondacks and attracted about 18 students. It's grown to 32 courses, with roughly 250 people signing up last year. Most of the trips, run out of an office and staging area in Gabriels, north of Saranac Lake, are designed for teenagers. But the organization also offers a handful of sessions each season for older students and people interested in wilderness medicine.

Lindsay is still NOLS's only year-round employee in the Adirondacks, but she says from spring to fall they grow to a crew of 10 office staff, plus a couple dozen instructors who rotate in and out. She hopes to expand the program again in the next few years, offering courses that extend into the shoulder seasons. "You wind up using these learnings in everyday life," she says, explaining the appeal. "We practice communication, gain self-awareness."

A quick reality check: If there's deep philosophy behind the NOLS approach, and a potentially big pay-off, the real-world experience can be brutal, especially for those unfamiliar with the outdoors. Students carry their own gear, they cook their own food. Except in serious emergencies, they tend their own sore feet and haul their own water. The bushwhack to

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NOLS runs 32 trips in the Adirondacks, most designed for teenagers. But it also offers sessions, including this September adventure, for students ages 23 and up, many looking for a break from their hectic lives. "It's refreshing to step away from phones and laptops and Netflix once in a while," says LeAnn Turner, from Berkeley, California.



the summit of Dial measures out at a harmless-looking mile-and-a-half on Kyle's map, but it takes his group more than four hours.

"There were a couple times where there was a pretty steep face where I was thinking, If I didn't have this gorilla on my back I'd be OK," says Barrett Turner, age 30, pointing to his massive backpack. But there are consolations even here. During the climb they stumbled across a gem-like tiny salamander called a red eft. "I've never seen an animal that orange before, which was pretty cool," Barrett says, grinning in wonder.

In a busy, crowded world, these travelers experience terrain few others will ever see. When they finally reach the rocky crags on Dial and then Nippletop, they seem a little drunk on the accomplishment. They laugh and point at vast valleys that roll away below, shimmering with fall color. "It's green and red and orange and yellow," says Jo Thrussell, a 44-year-old Englishwoman living in Cincinnati, Ohio. "There's just mountain after mountain. I'm in love with this place."

Looking back down the forested slope they just fought to climb, Jo laughs and shakes her head at the craziness of it. "It just makes you feel so alive. You're making your way through this difficult terrain. It's in your face. It's in your hair. But that was a really special experience. You put these limitations in your head and we proved today that there are no limitations out here. We can walk wherever we want."

Jess Stapleton, the 25-year-old from Knoxville, sits a little off to the side, away from the group, catching her breath and taking in the view. "One of the best parts about climbing up here is finding the quiet. That's my favorite part," she says.

After celebrating the victory of summiting two of the 46 High Peaks, the group down-climbs, following a blessedly well-marked trail from Nippletop toward their next campsite in Elk Pass. It turns out to be a magical place, a fold of forest in a deep valley tucked against a wetland. Dusk falls as the weary crew pitches tents and lights gas stoves to make supper.

"We're going to eat a lot tonight," Kyle says. "I'm going to cook pasta with cheese and chicken. I think people are surprised by how well they eat on NOLS trips given past experiences backpacking." This, too, is part of the learning, he says. He wants his students to realize you can live well out here and feel safe and at ease. "When you're cooking, you're practicing another skill you've been taught."

They gather with their head lamps, eating hungrily, laughing and sharing stories from the day. Despite their aching legs, they sound happy and relaxed. "Many of our students come here completely out of their comfort zone, maybe having never camped or backpacked before," says Phil Branca, 37. He's a teacher from Johnson, Vermont, during the winter and is the NOLS co-instructor of this trip.

Part of the challenge of leading trips like this, he says, is to help peo-



ple let go of fear. He and Kyle are careful to cover even the most basic concepts, using humor whenever possible. "Some of you have yet to have that wonderful experience of pooping in the woods without a privy," Phil says, once supper is over and the dishes are done. "We're going to do a little formal discussion on that in the morning, but if you need coaching this evening, come talk to us."

That sparks another round of laughter and teasing. Then the evening wraps up with an informal classroom session. This happens every night, with Kyle and Phil giving readings by authors like Edward Abbey and Edmund Hillary. The students are encouraged to talk about the high points of their day and the low moments when they doubted their endurance and knowledge.

"Any appreciations before we wrap up?" Phil asks. "Anything you're grateful for?"

"The stars right now," LeAnn says, leaning back and peering up through the trees. "They're pretty amazing." Jo chimes in: "I've got this picture-perfect memory of walking down a path with the river running alongside and the sunlight coming through the trees and the most amazing spectacle of colors. And then, yeah, at night we're treated to an abundance of stars."

It is a perfect autumn night, still warm, frogs in the wetland chiming, the moon and the Big Dipper rising over the Great Range. "This is a short window in their lives," Phil says later, after his students have wandered off to tents and sleeping bags. "But when they go home, there's a lot here to remember in terms of tolerance for adversity, a belief you can get through things you didn't think you could get through before. A day like this can bring that out in people."

In the morning, they'll pack up and hoist their gear onto their backs and do it again. They still have five days to go before this journey into the deepest Adirondacks is finished. ▲

The Adirondacks' expansive wilderness allows hiking and paddling opportunities—one of the reasons NOLS picked this region over the White and Green Mountains, says Northeast program director Lindsay Yost. "I think this place surprises people."

GOING WILD

This fall NOLS offers two Adirondack trips for students ages 23 and up:

September 15-23: Canoeing

September 22-30: Backpacking

Learn more about these programs and the National Outdoor Leadership School's other Adirondack—and global—coursework at www.nols.edu or (800) 710-6657.