

Rocky Mountain News

Trekking course takes the wild out of wilderness

Route finding, survival skills build confidence

By Janet Reese, Special To The Rocky
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As the ski season winds down, Colorado's "mud season" begins. This is a great time to hone mountaineering skills in preparation for summer hiking.

Can you find your way in the mountains with a map and compass? Could you survive overnight if lost in the wilderness? Can you stop yourself from sliding on a steep snow bank? Do you know the right gear and clothing to use in the backcountry? Do you hike with the "10 essentials?"

Wilderness Trekking School, offered by the Colorado Mountain Club, can make sure you've got the outdoor skills necessary for a trip to the mountains.

Christina Nida, of Denver, who took WTS last spring, said, "Born and raised in New York City, I could catch the subway, hail a taxi and merge my car from 12 lanes into one in no time. But the magnitude of the mountains remained overwhelming to me and I was hesitant to explore them alone."

At a friend's suggestion, Nida joined the Colorado Mountain Club. "My first contact with the CMC was taking the WTS class," Nida said. "I learned what equipment is necessary (the 10 essentials), map and compass skills, topography, survival, first aid and how to self-arrest in icy conditions. But most significantly, I gained the confidence to set out on wonderful and adventurous day trips."

Students come to the class with a different combination of hiking experience and knowledge, said WTS survival instructor John Lindner. "Some have no experience while others have climbed 14ers," he said. "The goal of WTS is to educate and train people to be safer and more confident backcountry hikers in a friendly and noncompetitive setting."

Each spring and fall, the WTS course fills with 150 to 170 students, who are divided into small teams of 10 to 12. Teams are formed based on the students' self-assessed fitness levels. A trained CMC volunteer senior instructor and an assistant instructor lead each team.

The program involves five group lectures followed by a team meeting. Classes are held on Tuesdays from 6:30-9:30 p.m. at the Colorado Mountain Club in Golden. Teams also practice the skills they learn on five, all-day field trips on Saturdays or Sundays.

"In WTS, you can always learn something new, no matter how experienced you are," WTS senior instructor Martha Mustard said. "Some students learn what they need to know from scratch."

The course is fun, Mustard said. "In addition to learning outdoor skills, students develop friendships and camaraderie," she said. "We don't push anyone; we're encouraging. For those new to the club, WTS is a good way to learn about the club, meet people and make friends to hike with."

Field trips

Field trips are the most popular part of the course, senior instructor Norm Arlt said. "Hands-on experience helps students learn the most," he said. "We concentrate on learning skills rather than physical conditioning. Students say they enjoy the field trips and wanted more, so we added a 'survival' field day."

The first field trip covers dry land travel in Eldorado Canyon State Park. Students practice a variety of techniques to negotiate different types of terrain, learning to walk on talus, scree, boulders, slabs and cross rushing streams.

Snow travel field day, held at Loveland Pass or Saint Mary's Glacier, begins with a short hike on a snow-covered hill. Team members practice self-arrest by sliding down the snow multiple times in different positions, using an ice axe to stop themselves. The CMC provides ice axes and helmets.

"Most students find snow day the most fun because it reminds them of playing in the snow when they were kids," Arlt said.

On map and compass day, held at the CMC land navigation course in Genesee, students find points they've plotted on USGS maps ahead of time. Working together, teams move from point to point while reading compasses, maps and evaluating the terrain.

Survival day, held at White Ranch Park, starts with a lecture on hypothermia, emergency shelter building and fire starting. Then teams practice building shelters and fire starting using the 10 essentials and minimal survival equipment.

The course culminates with a full-day graduation hike, when students apply all the skills they've learned. Instructors select the locations for their teams' field trip. Each team plans their trip, including the logistics of driving to the trailhead; checking the weather; determining elevation, distance and time for the hike; and mapping out the trail route. In the field, students execute their plans as teams, alternating roles of leader, map and compass navigator and rear leader.

Most everyone enjoys the graduation hike, Mustard said. "It's a learning experience," she said. "Reaching your destination is optimal, but groups don't always arrive at their destination. That doesn't mean the trip was unsuccessful. The hike is more a demonstration of what students have learned."

Real-life application

WTS graduates Tanya Romersa and Chris Sciora applied their wilderness skills in a near-survival situation during a 10-day car camping trip to the San Juan Mountains last year.

"After exploring Animas Forks, an abandoned mining town, we ended up taking a 'road' we shouldn't have," Romersa said. "We realized we were lost. All of our WTS training and tips readily came to mind, and to good use. . . . We were able to mentally retrace where we'd been to help navigate our maps. Most importantly, we didn't panic. Turns out, we were on 'mining roads' the whole time, none of which are on any map.

"Thanks to WTS, we had everything we needed from nutrition and water to warmth and first aid."

Wilderness Trekking School

When: Spring class begins April 10; registration deadline is April 3. Fall class starts Sept. 11.

Where: Colorado Mountain Club, 710 10th St., Golden.

Requirements: WTS is open to anyone at least 18 years old, in good health and a current CMC member.

Cost: CMC annual memberships are \$95 for one person or \$127 for a family. WTS tuition is \$80, which includes a 100-page student manual and all instruction.

What you need: Hiking boots and basic hiking equipment.

How to apply: To join the CMC and to register for WTS, call 303-279-3080, ext. 2, or apply at CMC.org.

For more information on WTS and an application: Go to WTS.CMCSchools.org

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