



Youth Wilderness Expedition FAQ

What is a Youth Wilderness Expedition like?

On an SBFC Youth Wilderness Expedition, you will learn what it means to be a Wilderness steward. You will backpack, camp, and learn the skills needed to live, work, and travel in the backcountry safely. You will engage the land through hands-on conservation work, and learn how to use traditional hand tools. Backpacking can be hard work - you will challenge yourself, physically and mentally, and come out of the program with confidence and independence. But most of all, you will have a lot of fun! You will enjoy the freedom of Wilderness, as well as the incredible beauty of the mountains, valleys, and alpine lakes.

We offer 4 and 6-day expeditions for teens ages 13-18. You will be placed with five other youth of about the same age, along with at least two adult crew leaders. We will hike and work for about 8 hours each day, and each evening we will cook, play games, and explore. Work may include trimming overgrown plants and fallen trees from the trail with loppers, hand saws, and crosscut saws, repairing the trail with pulaskis and shovels, naturalizing old campsites, or collecting data on the condition campsites. The amount and types of conservation work may differ between the 4 and 6-day expeditions.

Who can apply?

Any youth from Idaho and Montana can apply if they will be between the ages of 13 and 18 this summer! In 2024, preference may be given to those living closest to the Selway-Bitterroot Wilderness, in other words, those living in Ravalli County, MT, and the following Idaho counties: Adams, Clearwater, Custer, Idaho, Lemhi, Lewis, Nez Perce, and Valley. If you live elsewhere in Idaho or Montana, we still encourage you to apply!

How do I apply?

Applying is easy! Visit www.Selwaybitterroot.org to fill out a short form, and SBFC staff will email you additional information. Alternatively, you can email iharris@selwaybitterroot.org and request a paper application to be emailed or mailed to you.

Which expedition is right for me?

The 4-Day Wilderness Expeditions are geared toward 13-15 year-olds, or those entering 8th or 9th grade. 6-day Wilderness Expeditions are intended for 15-18 year olds, or those entering 10th grade and above. Recent high school graduates may apply if they are 18 or younger. 15 year-olds may apply to either expedition, but are encouraged to join a 4-day expedition if they recently completed 8th grade.

What are the benefits of joining an expedition?

An SBFC Youth Wilderness Expedition will teach you how to live, travel, and work in the backcountry safely and ethically. By the end of an expedition, you will have skills to return to the Wilderness on your own, or with friends and family. Furthermore, this experience will teach you how to perform basic trail maintenance and stewardship, exposing you to possible careers in



natural resource management. You will also receive a certificate of completion for 32 or 36 community service hours, depending on the length of the expedition. Community service looks great on any resume, and many schools require it for graduation or college applications. The expeditions will also push you, physically and mentally, and help deepen your connection to your public lands. Finally, you will meet new people, explore a vast and beautiful area, and have a lot of fun!

How much does the program cost?

Joining a Youth Wilderness Expedition is completely free! We even provide all the food for the trips, but we encourage you to bring any favorite snacks you may have. Furthermore, if you do not have all the required gear, we can provide you a tent, backpack, sleeping bag, and sleeping pad free of charge. If you do not have adequate hiking boots, and cannot afford to purchase them before the trip, let us know, because we may be able to help out.

What experience or skills do I need?

While youth of all experience levels are welcome, the expeditions are geared toward backcountry beginners. No prior experience or knowledge is required. We will teach all participants the skills needed to backpack, camp, and work in the Wilderness safely and ethically.

What gear do I need?

In short, you will need a backpack (60L+), lightweight tent, compressible sleeping bag, sleeping pad, a water carrying capacity of 3-5L, rain gear, and hiking boots. A more comprehensive gear list is available on our website and in the information packet emailed to you. Water filters, food storage containers, and kitchen supplies will be provided.

What if I don't have the right gear?

If you do not have a pack, tent, sleeping bag, or sleeping pad, we can provide them to you to borrow for free. We may have additional supplies available for borrow - let us know what you need. While we encourage youth to bring as much of their own gear as possible, we do not want cost to become a barrier for program participation. If you struggle to obtain good hiking boots, we may be able to help. Let us know!

What will we eat?

It's not all energy bars and trail mix out there - we eat pretty good! You can expect three meals a day. Common meals include oatmeal or bagels for breakfast, sandwiches for lunch, and many great dinners, including mac and cheese, stir fry, burritos, pasta, or a trail favorite - Hitchgiving (Thanksgiving in a pot)! Plus plenty of sweet and salty snacks! While food is provided, we encourage you to bring any personal snacks you might want out there. If you have any dietary restrictions (e.g. vegan, dairy free, gluten free), please let us know as soon as possible.



What about bears?

Luckily, there are no known grizzly bears in the Selway Bitterroot Wilderness, but that does not mean one could not travel through or establish a new home in the area. Regardless, there are many black bears! SBFC takes animal safety very seriously. We will teach all participants skills in bear safety, and crews will take all precautions. Crew leaders will have bear spray, and youth participants are welcome to bring their own with parental consent. By keeping a clean campsite and storing food properly, and with all the noise we will inevitably make, we are very unlikely to encounter a bear.

Will there be cell service?

Nope! We will be traveling into remote and rugged country, where cell service will likely be nonexistent. A few days in the Wilderness is a wonderful break from social media and news! For safety, leaders will have a Forest Service radio that connects us with emergency personnel 24/7, as well as a GPS device that can communicate with the SBFC office. Any emergency message can be easily communicated between a crew and the outside world.

Are there a lot of bugs?

Depending on the time of year and exact locations, ticks and mosquitos can be challenging. It is the one inevitable downside of nature! You can prepare for these pests by wearing bug spray, clothes that cover your arms and legs, and performing a thorough tick check every night. If we are lucky, the insects will not be too bad!

Where do we go to the bathroom?

If you have never pooped in the woods before, you will! Depending on the camp location, we will either dig a larger latrine for group use, or dig small single-use "cat holes". In the very unlikely event that we are camped near a backcountry cabin, we may have access to a primitive outhouse. Proper backcountry latrine procedures will be taught, and privacy will be guaranteed.

How do we bathe?

The short answer is that we won't - prepare to be a bit dirty and smelly! However, we take hygiene very seriously, and will require all participants to wash their hands daily, especially before cooking. Furthermore, we will almost always be camped near a water source where we can wash our arms and faces each day. Feel free to bring biodegradable soap on the off chance that we can swim in an alpine lake or calm river.

What happens if there are wildfires?

Wildfires can occur any time, and we will have backup expedition locations in case of last-minute changes. Our crews are in daily contact with both the SBFC office and local Forest Service dispatch center. If any wildfire starts or grows into our vicinity, we will be immediately notified and moved to a safe location. We will NEVER be near an active wildfire.



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What am I not allowed to bring?

You are encouraged to take many photos and videos throughout the expedition, and therefore you are allowed to bring a cellphone or digital camera. No other electronic devices are permitted, other than a small solar charger or power bank. We also encourage participants to refrain from downloading movies or shows on their phones. An expedition is a valuable opportunity to disconnect from screen time as much as possible! Bring a book, journal, or a deck of cards!

Firearms are not permitted. Nor are knives with a blade longer than 3 inches. Tobacco and drugs, including alcohol and marijuana, are not permitted. Participants that bring these items without our knowledge will be removed from the field.

Can I share a tent?

Members of the same family may share a tent. With written consent from parents or guardians, youth of the same gender identity may share a tent. No unrelated youth of different gender identities may share a tent.

Can I bring a friend?

Group sizes are limited, and we encourage you to take the chance to meet new people. However, sharing experiences with friends is one of life's greatest pleasures, so we would love if you encouraged your friends to apply as well!

I take medication. Can I bring it with me?

Bring any medication that you require with you. For liability reasons, all medication (except ibuprofen, epinephrine auto-injectors, insulin, and birth control) must be checked in with the crew leader upon arrival to the meeting location. Medication will be kept discreetly by the crew leader in a small locked bag, and made available by the leader at the correct times. Please only bring the exact amount of medication needed for the duration of the expedition.

What safety measures are put in place?

Safety is our number one priority. All of our crew leaders have training in Wilderness first aid and CPR, and at least one leader on each expedition will have a Wilderness First Responder certification or higher. All crews will have two first aid kits, bear spray, and at least two forms of communication with the outside world (a USFS radio and a Garmin inReach GPS device). We require all persons to wear hardhats, eye protection, and work gloves while working. We stretch before and after each work day, and teach proper ergonomics. We do not leave any participant unsupervised, and we have many policies in place to mitigate every risk.

Can I do more than one expedition?

To provide this experience to the most amount of people, we are limiting participation to one expedition per person. However, we can put you on a waitlist in case there is a last-minute vacancy on another expedition. If you had a good time, we would love for you to return in future years!



How do I get to the trailhead to begin the expedition?

Expeditions begin at the trailhead, and while they are often quick and easy to get to, trailheads can also be at the end of a long drive up a rough mountain road. We will arrange drop-off times and locations on the morning of each expedition, and pickup times on the final evening. Locations will be in centrally-located towns, such as Grangeville, Kooskia, or Hamilton. All participants will join in one or two SBFC vehicles, driven by staff or adult volunteer chaperones.

Is an expedition like a summer camp?

An SBFC expedition is not a summer camp, and our youth crew leaders are not counselors. While we strive to have the most amount of fun out there, we seek to find the right balance between recreation, education, and conservation work. While our stewardship projects are hard work, we are not a boot camp or a behavioral therapy organization. We value public service and aim to instill in youth the importance of giving back.

What can I do to prepare?

Backpacking and trail work can be quite physically challenging at times. But that only makes it all the more rewarding! While being in good shape can help a lot, we don't expect our youth crew members to be Olympic athletes. We welcome participants of all fitness levels! That said, one of the best things you can do is to go on a few longer hikes (5-6 miles). Not only does this prepare your body, but it can help break in your boots. Starting an expedition with new boots is a recipe for blisters!

Can I share my photos?

We encourage all participants to take many photos and videos! We will ask all participants to sign a voluntary photo waiver, so that SBFC can use some of the pictures to promote the program for future seasons. At the end of each expedition, we will share photo-sharing links, so that we can all share our pictures collectively. In addition, at least one participant from each expedition will be tasked with writing a blog for the SBFC website. Our Tales from the Trails: Wilderness Blog goes out every week, and it is a great way to share your experience with all of SBFC's supporters. Contributing to the blog entails writing 2-4 paragraphs, and taking plenty of photos or videos. If this interests you, feel free to volunteer!