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Mountaineering prepares student for challenges

By **Jeff Samoray**, *OU Web Writer*

Junior biology major Kai Schmidt learned a great deal about preparation and perseverance in one of America's most spectacular wilderness classrooms – Wyoming's Wind River Range. Schmidt had the experience of his life last August when he participated in a 31-day mountaineering course through the **National Outdoor Leadership School (NOLS)**, which teaches goal setting, planning, leadership and teamwork through extended wilderness expeditions.

Schmidt was among a group of 12 NOLS students and three instructors who hiked more than 100 miles in 28 days and climbed Gannett Peak, the highest point in the middle and northern Rocky Mountains at more than 13,800 feet. The class learned the basics of hiking, rock climbing and mountaineering as well as first aid, how to read maps, find routes, set up camp and cook meals.

"I learned a lot about being on my own and not relying on anyone else," Schmidt said. "The class teaches you about the real world. It helped me become more focused. Every day you had to get up, make your own food and be very prepared for the hike. It's also helped me a lot with school when it comes to studying and scheduling my day. I've learned to make the most of my time."

One of the first lessons Schmidt received came on the initial day of hiking when he had to combat altitude sickness.

"Our backpacks weighed about 90 pounds at their heaviest," said Schmidt, who took the class on the advice of a friend. "On the first day, I got really tired and dehydrated at about 8,000 feet. I had to stop and rest and drink lots of water. I really learned how important it is to drink water."

Each hiker carried about 26 pounds of food, which lasted from seven to 12 days. The group learned to cook and dry their food and set up tents before being resupplied for the major hike.

"We didn't carry dehydrated food," Schmidt said. "The instructors preferred that we eat beans, rice, noodles and cheese. We cooked on little camping stoves, and it was actually pretty good. We picked up our water from streams and lakes.

"We split up the tents and food among our group and slept three people to a tent. The weather was surprisingly warm, even in the mountains. I wore a T-shirt most of the time. It got colder at night but everyone had a good sleeping bag and jackets. Everyone was totally prepared."

After establishing a base camp at about 11,000 feet, the group rose at 6 a.m. to begin hiking. By noon, they had reached Gannett Peak's summit.

"It was more hiking than climbing, but we also learned skills like top-roping and ways to be safe about climbing," Schmidt said. "It actually took two attempts to reach the top because the first time we were concerned about the weather and crossing a tough patch of ice. Just about the whole time we weren't even on a trail. We hiked across glaciers and boulder fields. I saw a lot of hummingbirds, bighorn sheep and caribou. It was so beautiful. It was amazing to be in the middle of nowhere in that setting with no buildings in sight."

The highlight of the trip for Schmidt came during the last three days of the course when the class had to rely on their own navigation skills to return to camp.

"They gave us a map and compass and we were on our own," Schmidt said. "Returning to camp was a fun challenge. It was also nice to get back to camp after spending days walking on boulder fields. That's why it's very important to have a good pair of hiking shoes."

Schmidt wants to continue to improve his hiking and climbing skills and is planning trips to Kentucky's Red River Gorge and the Cascade Mountain Range in the Pacific Northwest.

"I grew up on 32 acres of land in Lake Orion and have always been interested in the outdoors," Schmidt said. "I took the class because I wanted to get better at climbing and learn a tried-and-true method. Now I feel really prepared to take more trips and continue climbing."

The National Outdoor Leadership School was founded in Wyoming in 1965 and has taken more than 75,000 students on exciting and challenging outdoor adventures. For more information, visit the [National Outdoor Leadership School](#) Web site or call (800) 710-NOLS.

SUMMARY

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