

ACC Ottawa Guidelines - Backcountry Hiking and Backpacking Leader

Scope

This document provides advice on "best practices" for ACC Ottawa amateur leaders leading Section backcountry hiking and backpacking trips. It is intended to help leaders plan and manage club trips. It should be read in conjunction with the "[ACC Ottawa Guidelines - Introduction](#)" which clarifies the distinction between frontcountry and backcountry trips. [Frontcountry hiking](#) is described in a separate guideline.

Introduction

Backcountry hiking and backpacking are done in remote areas which are either trail-less, involve obscure unofficial trails or official trails far from ambulance-accessible roads. Navigation can be challenging and require skill and experience. The activity can take place at any time of the year, such that weather and ground conditions can be quite variable. Trips may be exposed to several objective hazards, including deadfall, uneven terrain, wet and muddy or snowy and icy trails, steep ascents and descents, adverse weather, biting insects and potentially dangerous wild animals.

As a consequence of the remote and rough terrain, both leader and participants should be fit, self-reliant and able to deal with the worst case emergency scenario - an unscheduled bivouac taking care of an accident victim. This does not mean enough gear to go camping. Hikers should travel lightweight but have the essentials to survive a night in the bush (not necessarily in comfort).

Backcountry hiking may involve short sections of moderate scrambling - mainly class 2, maybe a bit of class 3. Terrain above that level of technical difficulty changes the character of the trip to scrambling or mountaineering. Refer to the [scrambling](#) and [mountaineering](#) guidelines.

First Aid Qualification

Either the Trip Leader or an Assistant Trip Leader should be "[AWFA-qualified](#)".

Guidelines for Backcountry Hiking and Backpacking Trip Leaders

- 1) prepare for a backcountry hiking or backpacking trip:
 - a) select an area, terrain and route for the desired level of hiking difficulty
 - b) research trail advisories and closures for the target area such as "mud season" restrictions and potential wildlife conflicts
 - c) estimate trip travel times, considering the number of daylight hours, group size, group experience level, terrain, ground conditions, distance, elevation gain/loss, etc.
 - d) for backpacking trips, investigate potential water sources and camping areas

- e) prepare and publish a trip notice in conjunction with the Hiking Coordinator, clearly defining the level of trip difficulty, group size limit and participant fitness, skill, experience and equipment requirements
 - f) screen trip participants, offering constructive suggestions for alternatives to those who do not possess the necessary fitness, skill, experience or equipment
 - g) advise participants on gear, clothing and supplies appropriate for the trip:
 - i) traction aids required or optional?
 - ii) a headlamp, layered clothing and a personal micro-first aid kit
 - iii) ensure adequate water and high energy food and snacks for the trail
 - iv) weight minimization techniques, particularly for multi-day backpacking trips
 - h) consider appropriate group safety gear: water filter, group first aid kit, tarp, insulated pad, small pot, fire starting kit, pruning saw, micro repair kit, bear spray
 - i) organize trip logistics such as transportation, hut bookings, food, etc. as appropriate
 - j) note emergency contacts for the area, mid-trip bailout routes, communication options and conceptualize how an accident would be handled
 - k) if ground conditions or weather are much worse than hoped for in the initial plan, consider alternative routes or objectives
 - l) ensure all participants read and sign the trip waiver prior to the trip; pass the signed waiver to the Hiking Coordinator at the earliest opportunity
- 2) knowledge and skills:
- a) skilled backcountry navigator with map and compass
 - b) bushcraft skills: improvise an emergency shelter, light a fire under adverse conditions
 - c) knowledgeable about weight minimization techniques for efficient backcountry hiking, backpacking and camping
 - d) knowledgeable about low impact camping
 - e) knowledgeable about techniques to avoid wildlife conflicts
 - f) knowledgeable about clothing layering options for efficient backcountry travel
 - g) preventing, recognizing and treating hypothermia
 - h) recognizing and dealing with backcountry hazards: changing weather; uneven terrain; difficult ground conditions (wet and muddy or snowy and icy); water crossings; equipment failure; steep ascents and descents; potential wildlife encounters
 - i) level-headed, calm and resourceful in an emergency
 - j) resourceful in making field repairs to equipment with minimal tools and supplies
 - k) confidence to mentor participants on the more difficult skills, such as negotiating difficult terrain, water crossings and short sections of moderate scrambling
- 3) supervise trip safety:
- a) delegate tasks to assistant trip leaders and engage other experienced participants
 - b) double-check items of participant gear and supplies considered critical to the trip

- c) brief participants on trip-specific safety hazards and safety procedures
- d) set a turnaround time
- e) maintain situational awareness with respect to terrain, ground conditions, weather, location, speed of travel, time of day, participant energy level and frame of mind, etc. and be ready to change plans, if appropriate
- f) good judgement to make tough, perhaps unpopular, safety-related decisions
- g) understand the club Emergency Response Protocol and take charge in an emergency

Useful References

1. "Mountaineering: The Freedom of the Hills", The Mountaineers, Seattle, 8th Ed., 2010.
2. "Professional Hiking and Backpacking Guides Handbook", Association of Canadian Mountain Guides (ACMG), 2004.