

ACC Ottawa Guidelines - Nordic Backcountry Skiing and Snowshoeing Leader

Scope

This document provides advice on "best practices" for ACC Ottawa amateur leaders leading Section Nordic backcountry ski and snowshoe trips. It is intended to help leaders plan and manage club trips. It should be read in conjunction with the "[ACC Ottawa Guidelines - Introduction](#)" section which clarifies the distinction between frontcountry and backcountry trips. [Cross-country skiing](#) on groomed trails and [alpine backcountry skiing](#) in mountainous terrain are described in separate guidelines. Any travel in avalanche terrain categorizes a trip as alpine backcountry skiing or mountaineering and is excluded from this guideline.

Introduction

Nordic backcountry skiing and snowshoeing are done on unmaintained, ungroomed trails or in trail-less areas where the leader and participants generally must break trail. These trips are characterized by carrying a day pack, short winter daylight hours, cold temperatures, variable and possibly difficult snow conditions, and rough backcountry terrain remote from quick outside assistance. Consequently, 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 winter camping. Go lightweight but have the essentials to survive a night in the bush (not necessarily in comfort).

Snowshoers and skiers should create separate snowshoe and ski tracks, wherever feasible, particularly on steep sections. This will improve safety and enjoyment for both groups.

First Aid Qualification

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

Guidelines for Nordic Backcountry Ski and Snowshoe Trip Leaders

- 1) prepare for a backcountry skiing or snowshoe trip:
 - a) select an area, terrain and route for the most likely snowpack conditions and desired level of skiing or snowshoeing difficulty
 - b) estimate trip travel times, considering the short winter daylight hours, group size, group experience level, terrain, snow conditions, distance, elevation gain/loss, etc.
 - c) 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
 - d) screen trip participants, offering constructive suggestions for alternatives to those who do not possess the necessary fitness, skill, experience or equipment

- e) advise participants on gear, clothing and supplies appropriate for the trip:
 - i) ski trips: skins required or optional?
 - ii) snowshoe trips: technical snowshoes with crampons required?
 - iii) a headlamp, layered clothing and a personal micro-first aid kit
 - iv) ensure adequate water and high energy food and snacks for the trail
 - f) consider appropriate group safety gear: group first aid kit, tarp, insulated pad, small pot, fire starting kit, pruning saw, micro repair kit (wire, tape, cord, electrical ties, pliers, knife, multi-bit screwdriver)
 - g) organize trip logistics such as transportation, hut bookings, meals, etc. as appropriate
 - h) note emergency contacts for the area, mid-trip bailout routes, communication options and conceptualize how an accident would be handled
 - i) if snow conditions or weather are much worse than hoped for in the initial plan, consider modifying the route or cancelling altogether
 - j) 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 clothing layering options for efficient backcountry travel
 - d) preventing, recognizing and treating hypothermia
 - e) recognizing and dealing with backcountry hazards: changing weather; widely varying snow conditions; equipment failure; travel through forested terrain; avoiding tree wells; crossing lakes, ponds and streams; steep ascents and descents
 - f) recognizing and avoiding avalanche terrain
 - g) level-headed, calm and resourceful in an emergency
 - h) resourceful in making field repairs to equipment with minimal tools and supplies
 - i) confidence to mentor participants on the more difficult skills, such as ascending and descending moderately steep terrain
- 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, snow 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. "[Backcountry Skiing Safety in the East](#)", Bill Scott, ACC Ottawa, January 2007.