New Student Trip Description
Backpacking in the Wallowa Mountains

The Wallowa Mountains in northeastern Oregon shoot up to nearly 10,000 feet and are more similar to the Rockies than the Cascades, with granitic ridges and Ponderosa forests. Named for the nearby Wallowa River (prounced Wal-OW-ah, meaning "fish trap" in the Nez Perce language), this rugged and remote range is actually the remnant of tropical islands! Its peaks and valleys have been home to Native Americans (including Chief Joseph), miners, and ranchers. There are over fifty lakes here, scoured out by glaciers in the last Ice Age.

This description does not cover all aspects of the trip, but it will give you a few more details about this adventure. Due to the many variables of outdoor trips, it's impossible to describe exactly what the trip will be like. The Wallowas are about an 8-hour drive from Portland. The first night of your trip you'll camp near the van somewhere close to the trailhead. On the last day of your trip, we'll pack up and head back to Portland the evening before New Student Orientation begins.

Vegetation and weather are similar to that found in the Idaho, Wyoming, and Colorado mountains (August weather is typically dry and sunny early in the day). The weather can be a beautiful 80° F at noon, and then be snowing by evening. It's not uncommon to have a little snow in late August in the Wallowas. Afternoon thunderstorms with lightning are common, but tend to be fairly short. It's not unheard of to have a rainy period lasting several days. Nights are generally cool to cold in the mountains, and the temperature can drop below freezing at night.

Fire danger is generally high at this time of the year, and participants must be very careful with matches and stoves. For this reason the trip is non-smoking.

You will be carrying a backpack that will weigh somewhere between 30 and 60 lbs., depending on your weight and your physical condition. If you have never backpacked, borrow a pack, fill it up with four plastic gallon jugs of water (1 gallon weighs around 8 lbs.) and walk around your neighborhood to try it out. Be sure to wear your hiking boots to try them out, too. The pack may seem pretty heavy but you'll soon get used to it. Practicing over the summer is advised. It is also very important to wear your hiking boots over the summer to break them in, if they are new. Most people who do this have fewer blisters and a better time on the trip.

The trails in the Wallowas are often steep. To get to some of the stunning high lakes, hikers must climb a series of switchbacks, so it will help to do some extra running or walking this summer to get yourself into shape. As you can expect, not everyone in the group will want to hike at the same speed, so there are probably going to be some compromises made on routes, campsites, and day hikes. On the average, the group expects to hike about 6 miles a day wearing backpacks, with a possible layover day in the middle of the trip.

There are animals that will eat your food unless it is hung from trees. Mostly these are squirrels and chipmunks, but bears are found in the area as well. We have never had a bear bother our camps in the Wallowas, but participants do need to be careful not to leave food in their packs, clothes, or tents at night. Yellow jackets, wasps, or hornets are very common at this time of the year, and people with the potential for severe reactions to stings need to carry anaphylaxis kits with them. Mosquitoes and flies can be plentiful or non-existent, depending on how cold the nights are and how dry the season has been. Usually the mosquitoes are not troublesome, but West Nile virus has been identified in the Pacific Northwest, so avoiding mosquito bites by using insect repellent and clothing to cover up bare skin is always a good idea.

Common injuries which could occur on this trip include blisters on feet (from people not breaking in their new hiking boots before the trip), people cutting their feet as a result of walking barefoot, people cutting themselves with pocket knives, people burning their fingers by handling pots on a stove without hot pads or gloves, spilling boiling water, and sunburn from not applying enough sunscreen at these high altitudes. These are all preventable with a little caution and common sense. Please note that our trips go to remote areas and medical help is usually at least one day away. Our trips will carry satellite phones, but remember that satellite service is sometimes not available in some areas. Please complete and return the online Health & Diet Questionnaire to inform our trip leaders of any conditions that you may have.

Water from streams and lakes needs to be filtered or treated before you can drink it. We have pumps and tablets to do this, which remove or neutralize Giardia, bacteria, and viruses. It's also important to practice minimum-impact camping techniques such as packing out all litter and food waste, not using soap in streams or lakes, and not camping on fragile meadows. Instructors will brief the group on low-impact camping techniques at the start of the trip.

The Wallowas are gorgeous mountains, often described as the "Oregon Alps". Streams are crystal clear and wildflowers will still be in bloom in late August. The lakes are simply amazing. It's a spectacular place to begin your college journey, in the wonderful company of your trip leaders and fellow new students. You won't soon forget this trip. Have a great summer, and we'll see you in August!