

# Winter Outdoor Education

**A**CCORDING TO GRIFF SMITH, former educator and principal, and one of the founders of Aspen Middle School's (AMS) outdoor education programs, the tradition of cross-country skiing and winter camping began in the 1970s with a transition to overnight hut trips in the late 1980s.

In the 1970s, a combined class of 5th and 6th grade students called "the un-graded" cross-country skied one day a week, working up to an overnight skiing adventure where kids built and slept in trench-style snow and tarp shelters. Locations included Weller Lake, Government Trail, Anderson Ranch and, with the encouragement and assistance of Bob Child, many of the kids camped out on the Child Ranch where as seventh graders they did a ski ascent of Haystack Mountain.

In the late 1980s Scott Edmondson, Smith's fellow teacher and outdoor education enthusiast, suggested incorporating huts into the program. After discussing the idea with Peter Loram, 10th Mountain's director at the time, Edmondson and Smith took a reconnaissance trip to Shrine Mountain Inn and ran into one of the owners, Chuck Ogilby, who was—and to this day—is still instrumental in making the AMS trips possible. The short distance, modest elevation gain, and accommodations were an ideal fit.

Smith noted that the Shrine Mountain Inn itinerary presented the kids with challenges they thought they couldn't achieve, but once they accomplished that first goal—skiing to the hut with heavy packs—they successfully tackled the other increasingly difficult goals, such as ascending Wingle Ridge on the second day, and skiing out 9-plus miles via Red Cliff on the final day.

The ski out to Red Cliff has been replaced by an elaborate, yet cost effective, use of school buses that requires the arriving and departing groups to use the same trailhead; but the focus—to give kids the opportunity to find their own grit and determination to overcome challenges—has not been replaced, and remains an integral part of these amazing AMS hut trips.



A late afternoon return to Jay's Cabin after a trip to Wingle Ridge

**A**MS PARTICIPATES in 10th Mountain's Backcountry Exploration Program, which encourages the use of the huts by non-profit educational groups, offering up to a 50% discount on whole hut rentals Monday–Thursday nights. 10th Mountain caught up with 6th Grade teacher Mark Munger, to learn about Aspen Middle School's (AMS) winter outdoor education program.

**How long has AMS been using the huts?**

I started teaching at the AMS in 1993, and the trips had been going on for a while, so I will estimate since the late 1980s.

**Have the AMS hut trips always been for the entire 6th grade over multiple weeks to Shrine Mountain Inn?**

Yes. We traditionally take six groups of 18-22 students and stay in Jay's Cabin and Chuck's Cabin. Each trip is a 3-day, 2-night experience.

**What is your role at AMS?**

My role has been to oversee the equipment, which includes all of our skis, bindings, boots, skins, sleds, and clothing. I have been charged with maintaining the gear and ordering equipment when needed. We have been very fortunate to have had the Aspen Ski Swap support over many years. I annually write a grant request to the Ski Swap, and those funds have been used to keep our students supplied with very

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nice equipment. Along with the other 6th grade teachers, we plan day ski trips and provide education regarding winter wilderness travel. We feel that this preparation has helped to ensure the success of our program. The entire program is a big undertaking, and we would not be able to do these trips without the efforts of all 6th grade teachers, parents, and community volunteers.

**When and where was your first school hut trip?**

My first year at the school, I went with the principal at the time, Griff Smith, to the Gates Hut with a group of students. We wanted to see if that hut was a suitable alternative from the Shrine Mt. Inn. We found that it was a bit too long for 6th graders. We realized that the Shrine Mt. Inn huts were ideal for our needs. Just under three miles to the hut is challenging, yet do-able, and rewarding for over 2000 students since I have been at the school.

**Does AMS have any unusual or noteworthy hut trip traditions?**

As with all of our Middle School outdoor education trips, we have a tradition of circling up each evening to debrief the day, listen to students' reflections on the challenges and rewards that they experienced, and offer everyone in the group the chance to provide positive feedback to the group. Our skiing tradition is to ski to the summit of Wingle Ridge on our second day. Each teacher that leads a trip has their own traditions of special meals, a special story at night, games, etc. My favorite has been to make some tele turns in the meadow above Walter's Cabin upon returning from Wingle Ridge.

**What is the award that is given to one 6th grader each year?**

Tell us about the mounted ski in the 6th grade core. We want to recognize students that have exemplified our SKIER traits (Self, Kindness, Integrity, Effort, and Respect). We have chosen those students from each trip to have their names mounted on a ski which is hung in the 6th grade core.

**What do you feel are the most important lessons that the kids learn (from the experience itself, and/or from topics covered on the trips)?**

Students often come away from this trip with a sense of accomplishment that is very difficult to replicate in the classroom. They have a physical challenge of skiing

in cold weather, carrying a heavy pack, and climbing to a height that many only see from a ski lift, automobile, or photograph. Pride and increased self-confidence are quite evident in many students. In addition, the challenges of preparing meals, keeping the huts clean, keeping track of their personal gear, and getting along with peers provides them with the opportunity to experience the challenge of working as a team.

**As a leader/educator, do you have any tips for taking kids on hut trips?**

Preparation is essential. Our day trips are important events that allow the kids to learn how to use the equipment, travel outside in the winter, and practice their skills. Not only do the adults prepare for themselves, the added burden of knowing student skills, personalities, medical needs, and what is in their pack is critical. I would say possessing a pound of patience, giving an earful of encouragement, and a sense of humor, are essential as well. Of course, all leaders need to have winter back-country skills and first aid training.

**Kids are notorious for bringing items they shouldn't on trips—any memorable items that were carried to a hut?**

Items that I remember are some very important stuffed animals, the occasional cell phone, several bags of candy, a very large hair dryer, and some outrageous slippers. This led to a slipper fashion contest that I have held the past few years. One year, a math book made it to the hut as one student thought we might be having math class at the hut.

**Speaking of, do you have a luxury item you take when you go on a hut trip?**

My comfortable slippers and swimsuit for the sauna would be about as luxurious as I get. Many of the teachers pack lemon drops or chocolate as rewards for skiing five minutes without stopping.

**What is your favorite hut and why?**

Jay's has become my favorite as I choose to sleep near the door in the main room. While not the most private or comfortable, I can prop myself up in the early morning, before the commotion, admire the log work inside, watch the sunrise, and hope to catch a view of a pine marten. 🦉