



American Youth Foundation Merrowvista

Camper and Family Handbook: Explorer Program



My own self, At my very best, All the time

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Welcome to Four Trails

Dear Explorer Camper & Family,

Whether this is your first year in Four Trails or you're returning for another year of adventure, we are so excited that you have enrolled in the Explorer program this summer. Your decision to participate in this program is just the start of an experience where you will be asked to connect, play, and reflect in the outdoors, and we couldn't be more excited to invite you on this journey.



At the core of Four Trails is the belief that when we are invited to explore and discover the wonder of the natural world, we are also inviting ourselves to explore and venture inward. In paying attention to what is astounding about the outdoors, we also pay attention to our equally astounding inner selves. We then use what we learn about ourselves to be better, more engaged community members.

This handbook is a good place to begin your preparations for the adventure ahead. The first section, "Welcome to the Explorer Program" covers many of the need-to-know topics for Explorer campers, and the sections that follow offer in-depth descriptions of what Explorer campers can expect while on trail.

Take the time to read through this document, and if you have questions or concerns about any of the items in this handbook or packet, please feel free to contact me. I'll be more than happy to help.

Get outside, listen, play, feel, connect, and happy trails

Chris Wellens

Four Trails Program Coordinator
American Youth Foundation – Merrowvista

Welcome to the Explorer Program

As an Explorer, you will embark on two adventures as you discover the fundamentals of outdoor adventure trips. These trips will include backpacking and canoeing.

Explorers will spend the first few days at camp with their village (group) and the larger community in order to create a foundation for a successful summer. Here, they will also practice their backpacking and canoeing and outdoor living skills as they prepare for their first trip. In between trips, Explorer campers will spend two or three days in camp preparing for their upcoming adventures; repacking, participating in teambuilding initiatives, focusing on specific skill building for the next trip and becoming acquainted with new equipment. Additionally, campers will spend the last one to three days in camp, wrapping up their summer experience while continuing to act as role models to the in-camp community. Through everything, they'll reflect on how they can best support each other as they build friendships, gain confidence, and thrive in the mobile communities they create while on trail.

Expect the Unexpected

The AYF makes every reasonable effort to ensure a fun, safe trip experience in which campers are encouraged to achieve their personal best. However, it is not possible to foresee or control every circumstance. Group dynamics, failure to follow instruction, missing a turn on road or trail, interactions with people not affiliated with the AYF, inclement weather and other environmental hazards can create unexpected challenges on-trail. Our staff is trained to problem solve when the unexpected arises and as a result our unplanned programmatic elements often serve as the greatest catalyst for teaching our participants life skills.

Unforeseen circumstances can provide a valuable learning opportunity for campers in the way of critical thinking and problem solving. Should an incident occur, our first priority is the safety of our campers as well as the quality of the group experience. To this end our course of action may include, but is not limited to addressing the incident with an individual(s) or the entire trip group, facilitating the group to collaboratively determine next best steps, and/or intentionally adjusting the itinerary. When campers are in the "leader of the day" role it is expected that low level incidents will arise, providing many opportunities for learning through camper-led problem solving.

In order to maximize the potential for a positive group and individual experience, it is of the utmost importance that campers come to Merrowvista physically fit, mentally prepared, and with the correct equipment. Please be sure to follow the specific training and equipment recommendations included in the next sections.

Four Trails Safety

Just as our in-camp programs encourage campers to take social, emotional, and physical risks in healthy and safe ways, our adventure programs are designed to challenge campers to take healthy risks in an environment where they can feel safe, supported, and valued. We encourage campers to try new things, to ask questions, and to explore what it means to be their own self in settings outside of their comfort zones.

We are additionally committed to remaining in constant dialogue within and outside of the camp community to help us continually refine the safety of the Four Trails program. Though specific safety protocols vary based on trip type, most can be categorized in 3 distinct areas, summarized below:

Pre-Trip Preparation and Assessment Protocols

All campers and leaders must arrive with a base level of physical and mental readiness that will allow them to participate for several hours in physically and mentally rigorous activities. Cycling trip participants have additional pre-trip requirements that ensure campers are familiar with basic cycling skills as well as the rules of the road.

Routine Safety Monitoring for All Trip Groups

Some of our protocols for monitoring trip safety include: daily group check-ins with camp coordinators, group safety and first aid briefings, cell phone and satellite phone support, in addition to van and transportation support when applicable.

Post-Trip Debrief and Route Evaluation

Our post-trip safety protocols include facilitated trip debriefs between coordinators, trip leaders, and campers, ongoing route evaluations including contact with local and state officials, and annual route review conducted by camp directors and coordinators.

Four Trails Fitness and Trip Preparation

It is important that campers arrive with a base level of fitness that will allow them to participate in physical activity for up to several hours at a time. Please take note of the following Four Trails Fitness and Training Program below. Not only are these guidelines important for your personal safety and enjoyment, it is necessary for the safety and enjoyment of others who will be a part of your mobile community.

Activities that could be undertaken to specifically prepare for camp include:

- Cycling on a bike or exercise machine.
- Swimming, running, or any other cardio-intensive sport.
- Yoga or any activity that works on flexibility and building core strength.
- Strength training exercises including push-ups, sit-ups, chin-ups, pull-ups and supervised weight training.
- Practicing healthy levels of hydration, diet, and rest.



Cardiovascular Endurance Assessment: Find a 1.5 mile course (local running track or set a back road course with a car.) Run and/or walk the distance as fast as you can. A desirable level of endurance for the Four Trails program is an elapsed time of less than 15 minutes.

Suggested Training Program:

Week	Cardiovascular		Strength	
	days per week	minutes per day	days per week	minutes per day
1	3	30	2	15
2	4	30	2	15
3	4	30	3	20
4	4	30	3	30
5	4	40	3	30
6	4	50	3	30
7	4	30	3	45
8	4	60	3	45

These activities will not only boost physical and mental readiness for Four Trails campers, but will also minimize the stress related to these physically demanding trip experiences.

Equipment and Clothing Recommendations

Merrowvista provides as much gear and equipment as possible for campers of the Four Trails program. In general, campers are responsible for providing personal gear including personal clothing, sleeping bags, and sleeping pads. Merrowvista will provide all essential group gear (including bikes, tents, panniers, etc). We encourage everyone to consider cost-effective and environmentally sustainable options for acquiring gear including borrowing from friends and family or purchasing secondhand items that are in good condition.

While some of the equipment listed below may not seem to fit your idea of summer weather, it is *all* very important. Temperatures can range from 40°F to 90°F in the summer, and weather is always variable. If you are uncertain about the type of equipment required, consider the following recommendations and feel free to call if you have questions.

Fabrics

When indicated on the packing list, please only bring synthetic fabrics (polyester) or wool when possible. Cotton loses its insulating properties when wet and therefore cannot ensure that campers stay comfortable, warm, and happy while on trail.

With this in mind, when weather permits, many campers prefer cotton, nylon, or quick-drying fabrics which keep your body cool. Having a few of these items is a good idea for long, hot days of hiking, biking, or canoeing.

Layers

Make sure that your trip clothing allows ample room for layering. Your rain coat should be able to fit 3 layers underneath it without feeling too tight or restrictive. Your three layers should include a thin, synthetic “base-layer” (long underwear, tops and bottoms), a second layer (long sleeve shirt, pants), and a heavier fleece outer-layer.

Raingear

Your raingear is one of the most important pieces of clothing for keeping you dry and comfortable. It must be waterproof, so please test your rain coat in the shower before coming to camp. If your raincoat fits well but is no longer waterproof, you can use a re-waterproofing sprays or wash-in solution to restore your gear (brands like Nikwax and Gear-Aid can be easily found at most outdoor retailers)

Sleeping Bags

There are two important factors to consider about your sleeping bag for this trip: warmth and compressibility. Sleeping bags need to have a ***synthetic fill***. Similar to polyester and wool, synthetic fill sleeping bags maintain their insulating properties when wet. This is especially important for canoe trips, when so much time is spent on the water. As packing space on trail is limited, it is helpful for sleeping bags to have a ***compression stuff- sack***, with straps on the exterior which can be cinched down to compress the bag (***compression dry-sacks*** are the most ideal, as they

keep your sleeping bag compact **AND** dry, and are typically more durable than regular stuff-sacks)

In addition, sleeping bags must be rated to at least 30°F. Warmer (10-20°F) are also adequate.

Sleeping Pads

Sleeping pads are an important factor in being able to sleep comfortably in a wilderness setting. There are many different kinds, but the main considerations are weight/size, insulating ability, and comfort. The most basic requirement for a sleeping pad is that it keeps your camper off of the ground, such as the Therm-a-Rest “Ridge Rest” or “Z-Lite” sleeping pads, which are foam and cannot be punctured (unlike inflatable pads), making them the most durable option.

What Not to Bring

We believe that the following items detract from the campers’ experience or create a safety hazard. In respect of the community, please **do not** bring these items to camp:

- Snacks, soda, gum, or candy
- Any kind of knife, axe, or hatchet
- Lighters, candles
- Aerosol bug spray or sunscreen
- Electronics including cell phones, radios, gaming systems, and e-readers
- Cash (Parents or campers can turn cash in to safekeeping on registration day.)
- All medications including over-the-counter and vitamins

If campers bring these items, staff will collect them for the session and return them at the end of camp.

Explorer Packing List

(O) denotes optional item

Trail-specific Gear

- 1 pair wool or synthetic gloves
- 6 Ziploc bags
- 4 heavy duty garbage bags
- 1 bowl + multi-use utensil
- 2 1-liter water bottles
- 2 bandanas
- 1 hiking backpack, ≈ 65-70 liters (O)

Bed and Bath

- 1 synthetic fill sleeping bag, 30°F or warmer
- 1 compression stuff sack for sleeping bag
- 1 towel
- 1 fitted sheet (cot or twin sized)
- 1 pillow
- 1 sleeping pad

Miscellaneous

- 1 bathing suit
- extra batteries
- 1 bottle sunblock
- 1 bottle insect repellent
- 1 flashlight or headlamp
- 1 toiletry kit (shampoo, toothpaste, etc.)
- 1 small bottle of hand sanitizer (O)
- 1 camera (O)
- 1 notebook or journal (O)
- 2 pens or pencils (O)
- 1 deck of cards/stationary/book (O)
- No more than \$15 - ***Have ready to hand in at registration***

Headwear

- 1 wool or synthetic hat
- 1 pair sunglasses
- 1 brimmed hat
- glasses (even if you use contact lenses)
- 1 insect head net (O)

Top

Shirts

- 2 synthetic t-shirts
- 1 synthetic long-sleeve top
- 5 in-camp cotton t-shirts
- 1 long sleeve cotton t-shirt

Outerwear

- 1 heavy wool or fleece insulating layer
- 1 waterproof rain jacket
- 1 fleece vest (O)

Bottom

Pants

- 1 pair waterproof rain pants
- 1 pair long underwear bottoms
- 1 pair comfortable long pants
- 1 pair fleece pants (O)

Shorts

- 2 pair dry-fit shorts
- 5 pair underwear

Footwear

- 1 pair sturdy sneakers
- 1 pair sturdy, waterproof hiking boots
- 3 pair wool socks
- 4 pair cotton socks
- 1 pair sandals/in-camp shoes
- 1 pair water shoes (closed -toe)

Communication and Photographs on Trail

All Four Trails leaders carry a cell phone while on-trail, as well as a satellite phone for more remote adventures. We have regularly scheduled check-ins with leaders while groups are on-trail. When possible, trip leaders will notify the Four Trails Coordinators at Merrowvista when the group arrives at its daily destination.

Campers will be able to receive and send mail in-camp before, between and/or after their trips. All mail received for campers while they are out on-trail will be stored for them until they return.

Due to the remote settings of these experiences, groups cannot provide regular detailed real-time updates or photographs. We will update our website and blog between trips or as often as information is received.

Meals on Trail

Backpacking and paddling trip food is supplied by our Food Pack-Out System. Leaders are trained to plan and provide menus that are in line with the values of the Merrowvista Food Program.

Leaders ensure that campers receive food that helps them “go” throughout the day (complex carbohydrates and sugars, healthy fats), the food that helps them



“grow” (nourishing proteins such as nuts, beans, grains, dairy, and meat when available), and the food that helps them have a healthy “glow” (fresh fruits and vegetables).

Our goal is to ensure that all campers are eating sufficient meals in terms of quantity and healthfulness. Junk food, candy, and soda do not provide the same level of nutrition as other food options, and in some cases may harm a physically active body, and we ask that campers do not bring these items to camp.

Camper Money on Trail

Campers are allowed to bring spending money for souvenirs. Merrowvista suggests parents provide pocket cash not exceeding:

- \$25 for **Adventurer** campers
- \$50 for **Voyageur** campers
- \$25 for **Odyssey** campers

Merrowvista does not use camp store accounts and we are unable to charge credit cards for the purpose of providing a cash advance for on trail spending, so we will collect camper spending money on opening day and distribute it to campers before the start of their trip.

We aim to minimize inequities in pocket money between campers. As such, we ask that you do not provide any money in any form to your camper that exceeds the recommended amount.

Weather Conditions on Trail

Weather on the roads, rivers, lakes, and trails can change very quickly and be quite severe. Wind, rain, and extreme temperatures in particular can affect the plans of a trip group. Additionally, rain can cause less than adequate conditions including slippery terrain, increased workload for the cyclist, paddler, or hiker, and loss of body heat on cool days.

While all these conditions are manageable and we have specific policies in place to respond to various weather conditions, it's important that all campers are physically fit and come prepared with the correct equipment. Please follow the equipment recommendations included in the clothing section.



Sanitation and Hygiene on Trail

Sanitation and hygiene are just as important on-trail as they are in camp. For the health and safety of all group members, we encourage the following:

- Hand washing/sanitation is mandatory before all meals and after going to the bathroom.
- Groups use public facilities when available and practice “Leave No Trace” wilderness ethics.
- Personal and group dishes will be washed and sanitized after every meal. All food scraps will be disposed of responsibly.

Removal from Trips

It is never easy to reach the decision that a camper should be dismissed, and we know it is a difficult thing for parents to hear. Behaviors that result **in immediate dismissal** include but are not limited to: threat to harm self or others, possession or use of drugs or alcohol, and possession of a weapon. If a camper’s actions, statements, or attitude negatively impact the group or the wider AYF community, or if a camper is physically, mentally, socially, or emotionally unable to participate in camp activities, they may be dismissed. AYF staff must balance what is best for the group and community with the needs of an individual camper.

If it is necessary for a camper to be removed from a trip for any reason AYF staff will return the camper to Merrowvista or a local airport. Parents/Guardians are responsible for picking up their camper as soon as possible.

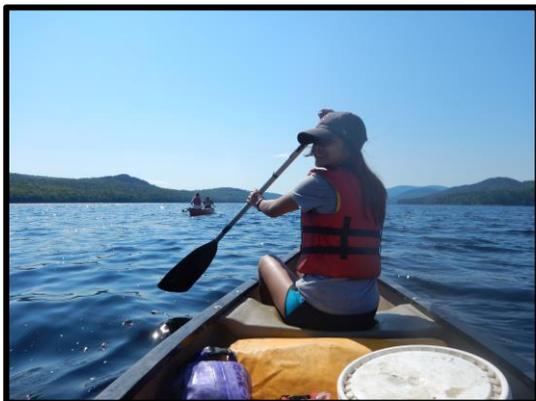
Injuries on Trips

If a camper is seriously injured or ill on-trail, staff will contact camp and make arrangements for the camper to be transported to the nearest hospital. A Merrowvista staff person will contact parents/guardians, and share the contact information for the hospital. If a camper is unable to continue on the trip, Merrowvista will arrange transportation back to camp, and parents should pick up their child as soon as possible. Parents are responsible for all medical and associated evacuation costs. Families may be eligible for a prorated tuition medical refund.

Explorer Canoeing Program

What does the overall experience for an Explorer paddler entail?

Merrowvista's paddling program at the Explorer level is designed to introduce campers to the fundamentals of canoeing during extended river and lake trips. Camper gear is loaded in dry bags and water-tight containers and then transported in canoes along with essential group gear and food items. Groups will stay at approved campsites along the rivers and lakes they will be paddling.



What does an average day on the water look like for an Explorer paddler?

Groups will generally paddle between 3 and 7 hours a day depending on wind, group speed, and water levels. Wake up and meal times will vary and will be dependent on the group's time management, efficiency and other environmental factors, keeping in mind the importance of getting into camp with time to make dinner and enjoy the evening.

Throughout the day, campers and leaders will work towards logistical, personal and group goals for the trip. Villages will also engage daily in a reflective activity to deepen understanding of both the individual and group experiences.

Where do Explorer paddlers canoe?

Explorers typically paddle along the rivers and lakes of New Hampshire and/or Maine. Campers paddling on rivers will navigate through whitewater with leaders who have been trained by a whitewater specialist.

All Explorers will spend 6 days and 5 nights paddling along the Androscoggin and Magalloway rivers as well as lakes Aziscohos and Umbagog. Additionally, before they head out on trail Explorers will spend time learning moving water skills under the supervision of their leaders.

What special clothing should Explorer paddlers wear?

Please consult the packing list for a comprehensive list of what Explorer paddlers should bring to camp. The following are recommendations specifically for paddling trips:

Extra Clothing

If possible, it is important that campers will have a 'wet set' of clothing in which they will paddle and a 'dry set' to wear once they make camp. Both sets should follow the Four Trails recommendations and guidelines for clothing fabrics.

Water Shoes

All paddlers must wear closed toe shoes while swimming and cooking. *Crocs, Tevas and other similar hybrid sandal-shoes are not considered 'closed-toe'*. When choosing footwear for your trip, keep in mind some shoes may overlap in purpose; however, it is necessary to have a dry pair of closed toe shoes for on-land activities.

Hats

All campers are required to have a hat for sun protection, preferably a wide brim hat that can be secured to them in windy conditions. It is also important for campers to have a fleece or woolen hat to wear at night, as the temperatures can vary greatly.

What equipment does Merrowvista provide?

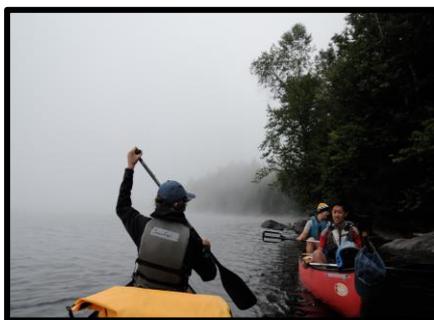
In addition to a canoe, Merrowvista will provide paddles, PFDs, and dry bags.

Group Equipment

Campers will be provided with camping equipment which will include tents, stoves, fuel, emergency food, water containers and sanitation items.

Leader Equipment

While on-trail, leaders carry an extensive first aid kit and are trained in high-level first-aid. Leaders also have cell or satellite phones and are in regular contact with Merrowvista. Finally, leaders carry a complete set of maps and resources to assist in route navigation and camping arrangements.



Explorer Backpacking Program

What does the overall experience for an Explorer backpacker entail?

Merrowvista's backpacking program at the Explorer level is designed to introduce campers to extended multi-day hiking while living as a low-impact mobile community in the backcountry. Campers will carry all of their personal gear as well as the necessary distributed group gear items. Since packs may weigh between 30 and 50 lbs, leaders are trained to be very intentional about each participant's pack to body weight ratio.

Groups will be staying at approved lean-to campsites along the trail. They will use tenting platforms where available and are expected to adhere to a Leave-no-Trace ethics and follow all responsible camping procedures. It should be noted that the



groups will be traveling on very steep and challenging terrain. Any opportunity campers have to hike with weight on their back prior to arriving at camp will aid them in preparing for their summer challenge.

What does an average day on-trail look like for an Explorer backpacker?

Groups will generally hike between 3 and 7 miles a day. During their time in the backcountry, campers will be hiking along the very rugged trails of New Hampshire and Maine. They will be staying at pre-determined campsites that are first-come first-serve, so reaching destined campsites is

important to ensure that there is an adequate place for the group to stay overnight. Wake up and meal times will vary and are dependent on the group's time management, efficiency and other environmental factors. It is a primary goal to reach camp safely, with time to make dinner, enjoy the evening, and rest up for another challenging day. Leaders hold a certification in Wilderness First Responder in order to manage illness or injury in the backcountry, and will be equipped with first-aid kits as well as cell and satellite phones.

Throughout the day, campers and leaders will work towards logistical, personal and group goals for the trip. Villages will also engage daily in a reflective activity to deepen understanding of both the individual and group experiences.

Where do Explorer backpackers hike?

The Explorer backpacking trip is a 5-6 day trip in the Mahoosuc Mountain Range of Maine and New Hampshire. Our itineraries are designed to introduce the fundamentals of backcountry travel and low-impact camping, while still challenging individuals in their four folds. The trails for Explorer groups are incredibly rugged and have a fair amount of elevation gain and loss. The days will start quite in order to allow for a relaxed pace and early arrival at campsites.

What should I do to prepare for my backpacking trip?

The best way to train for a backpacking trip is to practice carrying weight on your back! Take a hiking backpack or another large pack with a hip belt and put some weight in it. You could even just fill your everyday backpack with a bunch of books and walk around with it. Getting used to walking with weight on your back will make doing so for long stretches easier.

Hiking Boots

A key part of preparing for Explorer backpacking is purchasing and breaking in your boots. We recommend high-cut, waterproof synthetic or leather hiking boots that provide ankle support. Comfort is the most important quality, remembering to provide ample room for toes and thick socks. While tightly laced up, knock the toe of your boots against the ground behind you. If your toe touches the front of your boot, you should buy a larger pair to avoid bruising toes on long down hills. Try on the boots late in the day when your feet have swelled to see if they still fit. Finally, break them in. There is no such thing as breaking your boots in too much. Three days per week of daily wear plus a few practice hikes over the course of a couple months should provide appropriate wear before the start of your camp session. We recommend going to an outdoor outfitter to get properly fitted for your hiking boots. A good pair of hiking boots should be considered an investment, especially if you are planning to do Four Trails trips in the future.

What equipment does Merrowvista provide?

Backpacks

When backpacking, campers will carry all of their personal gear as well as a portion of the group camping equipment and food. It is important to have a well-fitting pack of the appropriate size and quality. Merrowvista is happy to provide backpacks for all Explorer backpackers. If you are bringing your own backpack, please make sure it is a rugged backpack intended for trips up to 7 days in length. Please avoid travel backpacks. In general, you will need about 65-70 liters for internal frame packs, less for external frame packs.

Group Equipment

Groups will carry a variety of equipment that will include tents, stoves, fuel, emergency food, water containers and sanitation items.

Leader Equipment

While on-trail, leaders carry an extensive first aid kit and are trained in high-level first-aid. Leaders also have cell or satellite phones and are in regular contact with Merrowvista. Finally, leaders carry a complete set of maps and resources to assist in route navigation and camping arrangements.





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Contact Details

In your preparation for the summer, please direct any questions regarding the information contained within this handbook or other questions about the Four Trails program to our Director of Camp Programs, Chris Wellens (contact details listed below). Additional and replacement copies of this handbook, training forms and packing lists are available on the Merrowvista website www.ayf.com.

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My own self, At my very best, All the time