



American Youth Foundation Merrowvista

Camper and Family Handbook: Odyssey Program



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

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Welcome to Four Trails

Dear Odyssey 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 Odyssey 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 Odyssey Program" covers many of the need-to-know topics for Odyssey campers, and the sections that follow offer in-depth descriptions of what Odyssey 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

Director of Camp Programs
American Youth Foundation – Merrowvista

Welcome to the Odyssey Program

Odyssey campers spend one night in camp before they depart for the Appalachian Trail. They will arrive at Merrowvista on Opening Day, start to form their group, and pack for their departure the next morning. Due to the very short amount of preparation time in camp, it is critical for Odyssey campers to arrive ready to go with the appropriate gear.



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 and from those much learning is gained with 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 proper 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 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, they are 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, backpacks 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 give us a call if you have questions.

Fabrics

When indicated on the packing list, please only bring synthetic fabrics (not cotton) 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 to lounge in cotton, nylon, or quick-drying fabrics which keep your body cool. Having a few of these items is a good idea after long, hot days of hiking, biking, or canoeing.

Layers

Make sure that your trip clothing allows ample room for layering fabric on top of one another. 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 “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 solid 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 make sure not to bring these items:

- Snacks, soda, gum, or candy
- Any kind of knife, axe, or hatchet
- Lighters, candles
- Aerosol sunscreen, bug spray, etc.
- Electronics including cell phones, radios, gaming systems, and e-readers

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

Live Simply, Pack Less!

While on trail, every ounce of gear adds up. The packing list below details exactly what is needed to keep you happy, safe, and comfortable while on trail. Please stick to this list as best you can, and contact us if you have any questions or concerns.

Please note that Odyssey campers will be spending very minimal time at Merrowvista before and after their trip. Anything left behind at camp will be transported and stored in a secure location. For these reasons, we ask that you please refrain from bringing any additional heavy, bulky, or delicate items.



Odyssey 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
- 1 multi-use utensil
- 3 1-liter water bottles
- 2 bandanas
- 1 hiking backpack, approx. 4500-6000 in³ (O)

Bed and Bath

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

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
- 1 camera (O)
- 1 notebook or journal (O)
- 2 pens or pencils (O)
- 1 deck of cards/stationary/book (O)
- No more than \$25 - ***Have ready to hand in at registration***

Headwear

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

Top

Shirts

- 3 polypropylene/synthetic T-shirts
- 1 polypropylene/synthetic long-sleeve top
- 2 in-camp cotton t-shirts

Outerwear

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

Bottom

Pants

- 1 pair lightweight, waterproof rain pants
- 2 pair long underwear
- 2 pair comfortable long pants
- 1 pair fleece pants (O)

Shorts

- 2 pair lightweight, quick-dry shorts
- 6 pair underwear

Footwear

- 1 pair sturdy, waterproof hiking boots
- 4 pair wool or synthetic socks
- 1 pair sturdy sneakers
- 3 pair cotton socks
- 1 pair sandals/in-camp shoes

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. Where possible, we offer premium fuel options, including whole grains, fresh fruit and vegetables, and alternative proteins. Some meals and snacks include: Oatmeal with Granola and Dried Fruit, Bagel Thins with Hummus and Summer Sausage, Soy Butter and Jelly Tortillas, Southwestern Chili, Chicken & Rice Curry, Trail Pad Thai, Clif Bars, various Granola Bars, and Fruit Leather.

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 spending money for souvenirs. Merrowvista suggests parents provide pocket money 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 cycling 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.

Resupply

Odyssey campers will have a resupply around the midpoint of their trip. At this point, we provide the group with all the food, gear, and clean clothing (set aside prior to leaving camp) necessary to complete their journey. Additionally, we will bring them fresh food for celebratory meals that day.

An important part of resupply for campers is hearing from camp and from home. We're happy to deliver letters of support from family, friends, and loved ones. However, due to the added weight from new food and supplies, we ask that you refrain from sending packages or other items that would need to be carried by your camper while on trail. Campers will happily receive packages when they return to camp after their triumphant return.

If you or someone you know wants to have a letter delivered to your child, please have it sent to Merrowvista to arrive on or before the first Thursday of camp. Letters received by that time will be delivered with the resupply.



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 proper equipment.



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.

Injuries on Trips

If a camper is severely injured or becomes extremely 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.

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, or 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.



Odyssey Backpacking Program

What does the overall experience for an Odyssey backpacker entail?

Odyssey is the culminating backpacking trip offered at Merrowvista. During this trip, campers will have the opportunity to work on their low impact camping and hiking skills, as well as build bonds within their mobile community. This trip is self-supported so campers will carry loaded backpacks containing personal and group gear. They will also carry and prepare their meals daily. It is essential that each camper come to Merrowvista in good physical condition in order to meet the demands of the trip.



Odyssey will receive a resupply during the trip at which time the group will obtain new food rations, supplemental gear, and a change of clothes that they have set aside prior to their departure. They will also have the opportunity for a rest day during the trip.

Towards the end of the experience, Odyssey campers will enter Baxter State Park where they will camp at the base of Mt. Katahdin and have multiple opportunities to summit, depending on weather.

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

Odyssey campers will hike the most remote and rugged portion of the Appalachian Trail. It is crucial for groups to arrive at their campsite with enough time to set up camp, prepare dinner, share in a reflective activity, and get the sleep they need for the next day. Therefore, days will start early to account for weather, varying physical demands of terrain, etc.



Throughout the day, campers and leaders will exercise all four folds in order to work towards logistical, personal, and group goals for the trip. Villages will also engage daily in a reflective activity to round out growth and understanding of the group experience.

All leaders will be equipped with first-aid kits and satellite phones, and will have Wilderness First Responder training in order to manage illness or injury in the backcountry.

Where do Odyssey backpackers hike?

Odyssey campers will start their trip at Shaw’s Boarding House in Monson, Maine. The following day, they will begin hiking the Appalachian Trail (AT) until they reach the northern terminus and highest summit in Maine, Mt. Katahdin— an itinerary of roughly 125 miles. This stretch of trail is known as The Hundred Mile Wilderness, for its remote access and undeveloped beauty.

Odyssey campers hike between 3 and 13 miles a day, depending on terrain. Along the trail, groups will encounter river crossings, diverse flora and fauna, boulder fields, and steep ascents and descents, all of which contribute to some of the most breathtaking scenery in New England.



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 Odyssey 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. 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 (or other) adventure 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 Odyssey backpackers. If you are bringing your own backpack, please make sure it is a rugged backpack intended for a 15 day trek. Please avoid travel backpacks. In general, you will need about 75-85 liters (4500-5500 cubic inches) for internal frame packs, and slightly 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.





American Youth Foundation

www.ayf.com

Merrowvista

147 Canaan Road
Center Tuftonboro, New Hampshire 03816
603 539-6607 • 603 539-7504 (fax)

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.

Chris Wellens, Director of Camp Programs	603-539-6607 x2010	cwellens@ayf.com
Lauren Abrami, Director of Program Development	603-539-6607 x2026	labrami@ayf.com
Lisa Boucher, Registrar	603-539-6607 x2011	lboucher@ayf.com

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