



Trail Running: Frontcountry and Backcountry Standards

This standard applies to Mountaineers-sponsored trips on established routes longer than one mile round trip, including in urban settings such as city parks and bike paths. This standard applies to any committee sponsoring a trail run trip, whether or not that trail run forms part of a course. This includes, but is not limited to: Trail Running, Hiking, Backpacking, Climbing, Lodges, Photography, Naturalists, Retired Rovers, Singles, or other such committees which may offer running activities.

TRIPS

Trail running trips are restricted to maintained and unmaintained trails with the following exceptions:

- Travel may proceed on snow-covered trails unless the route exposes the party to terrain where a slip is likely to result in an uncontrolled slide or to avalanche hazards.
- Parties may make off-trail excursions as long as the route does not expose any party member to terrain that is unreasonably hazardous for them to cross given their skills and experience.

Trail run trips are divided into three categories: frontcountry, backcountry, and fastpacking. Fastpacking trips are considered overnight or multi-day backcountry trail run trips.

Frontcountry Trail Routes

Frontcountry trail routes are established routes where most of the following conditions apply:

- reception for communication with emergency services is nearly constant
- the route is frequently used by others;
- exit points are easily reached; and
- help is easily summoned.
- There should not be significant off-trail travel as part of the route.

Examples of Frontcountry locations are city parks and state parks (e.g., Discovery Park, Bridle Trails State Park, Redmond Watershed Preserve); urban and suburban trails (e.g., Issaquah-Preston Trail, Snoqualmie Valley Trail); the Issaquah Alps (Tiger, Squak, and Cougar Mountains) and open spaces/greenbelts (e.g., Coal Creek Natural Area, Bellevue's Lake-to-Lake Trail).

Backcountry Trail Routes

Backcountry trail routes are established routes in wilderness areas and other remote areas where the following conditions apply: help is not easily summoned; the terrain is rugged and difficult; the route may not be frequently used by others; exit points are few and far between and may not always be accessible; or in the leader's judgment, the route does not qualify as a frontcountry route. Examples are national parks and designated wilderness areas (e.g., Alpine Lakes Wilderness, North Cascades National Park); long-distance trails which do not intersect with roads (e.g., Pacific Crest Trail Section J between Snoqualmie Pass and Stevens Pass); and primitive, unmaintained trails (e.g., the Enchantments traverse between the Lake Stuart trailhead and the Snow Lakes trailhead). There should not be significant off-trail travel as part of the route.

DIFFICULTY RATINGS

The difficulty of a trail running route will be rated using the following scale as a general guide, and the rating must be entered on the activity listing with the specific distance and elevation gain communicated to participants in pre-trip communications. Ratings may be adjusted to account for trail conditions (i.e. packed snow not requiring snowshoes/skis, boulder fields, mud, or deep gravel lending to slippery conditions) and weather/environmental conditions (i.e., unusual hot/cold temperatures or running in the dark). Large stretches (>20% of the total trail) of technical trail conditions should increase the trip's rating to reflect greater difficulty. In addition, the ratings may be adjusted to a higher difficulty level due to the need to use equipment, such as traction devices or poles, or to inclement weather.

- **Easy (E):** Up to 5 miles roundtrip with less than 1000 feet of elevation gain or a moderate trip with an average pace of 3-4 mph or slower. Easy runs are not held in darkness and do not require equipment such as traction devices or poles.
- **Moderate (M):** Up to 10 miles roundtrip or with 2,000 – 3,000 feet of elevation gain or a strenuous trip with an average pace of 3-4 mph. Trail runs which would otherwise be categorized as Easy (E) but that do require equipment such as traction devices or poles or that are held in darkness should be listed as Moderate (M).
- **Strenuous (S):** Up to 15 miles roundtrip or with 3,000 – 4,500 feet of elevation gain or a very strenuous trip with an average pace of 3-4 mph. Equipment may be required; the trail run may be held in darkness.
- **Very Strenuous (VS):** 15 miles to 20 miles total; or with over 4,500 feet of elevation gain or a shorter mileage/smaller elevation trip with an aggressive pace. Equipment may be required; the trail run may be held in darkness.

Note for all Ultra categories: Equipment may be required; the trail run may be held in darkness.

- **Ultra:**
 - Any route between 20 and 31 miles total which does not fall under Advanced Ultra 1 as described below.
 - Example: running 20 miles at Cougar Mountain park; running 3 laps of Lake Youngs Park in Renton where each lap is 9.3 miles for 27.9 miles total; running the full length of the Centennial Trail in Snohomish which is 30 miles long.
- **Advanced Ultra 1:**
 - Any route between 20 and 31 miles roundtrip which will be covered at an aggressive pace.

- Example: running 3 laps of Lake Youngs Park in Renton for a total of 27.9 miles at a fast pace.
 - Any route between 20 and 31 miles round trip which has an exceptional level of difficulty or remoteness or requires significant technical skills and equipment.
 - Example: Running northbound on the Pacific Crest Trail from the Snoqualmie Pass trailhead to Park Lakes and back for a 32 mile round trip; running the Cutthroat Classic trail race's course as an out-and-back with technical climbs and descents for a 22 mile round trip; running on a snow-covered route in winter conditions with traction devices for 20 miles.
 - Any route between 32 miles and 50 miles which does not fall under Advanced Ultra 2 as described below.
 - Example: Running the 32-mile Snoqualmie Valley Trail in its entirety; running the Tiger Mountain Trail out-and-back for approximately 32 miles; running on sidewalks, trails, and roads (paved or dirt) for 32-50 miles in a location where help can easily be summoned and/or a vehicle could go.
- **Advanced Ultra 2:**
 - Any route between 32 miles and 50 miles round trip which has an exceptional level of difficulty or remoteness or requires significant technical skills and equipment.
 - Any route between 32 miles and 50 miles round trip which will be covered at an aggressive pace.
 - Any route 51 miles round trip or longer, even if held in a non-backcountry setting.
 - Example: the Seattle Stairway Foot Tour which covers 65 miles in Seattle and includes every major urban staircase and has 11,000 feet of elevation gain; circumnavigation of Mount Hood on the Timberline Trail which is 40 miles long and has 9,000 feet of elevation gain.

LEADER RATING

In addition to the route difficulty, a Leader Rating must be specified for each activity. This provides the leader with a way to modify the baseline route difficulty based on specifics of how they will lead the trip. The following are examples of criteria a leader may consider in setting the Leader Rating.

- **Casual:** Average pace 3 mph or slower (counting any rest breaks but not counting a lunch break or a planned pause for instruction and skills practice). No technical challenges are present and no equipment or special skills are needed. Run is not held in darkness.
- **Easy:** Average pace 3-4 mph and no technical challenges are present and no special skills are needed.
- **Moderate:** Average pace 3-4 mph OR an easy route with a heavier pack due to logistical requirements, such as the need to carry extra water/supplies, or some route challenges (e.g. rough trail, log crossings, steep terrain, crossing a talus slope).
- **Challenging:** Average pace >3 to 4 mph OR a trail run rated as Moderate (M) done with a heavier pack that the leader plans to lead in a challenging fashion, or significant route challenges or skills requirements (e.g. fixed ropes, very rugged terrain, steep scree descents, snow crossings; mandatory use of traction devices). Challenging applies to all routes rated as strenuous, very strenuous, and ultra. Challenging also applies to organized races/events where participants aim for maximum speed and must negotiate the trail with others participating in the same race/event.

It is recommended that the leader clearly specify the distance and elevation gain for the route as

well as their planned pace, any special technical challenges, and any special gear, skills and conditioning requirements in the trip posting within the activity summary and/or the leader's notes.

PARTY SIZE

The minimum party size for a frontcountry trail run is 2: one leader and one participant. The minimum party size for a backcountry trail run is 3: one leader and two participants. The maximum party size is 12 unless other party size limits apply.

LEADER MINIMUM QUALIFICATIONS: FRONTCOUNTRY AND BACKCOUNTRY TRAIL RUNS

Leaders must be Mountaineers members, at least 18 years old, with an up-to-date waiver on file. Leaders must be approved to lead trail runs by a Mountaineers branch trail running committee, and entered on their committee's leader list. Once approved by one branch committee to lead trail runs, the leader is qualified to lead trail runs for any branch but must request to the committee chair to be added to another branch's leader list.

Leaders must demonstrate basic competency in each of the following key elements before being approved to lead a Mountaineers trail run. Under each key element, bullets highlight examples of the skills, behaviors, or knowledge factors expected of a Mountaineers trail run leader within that element.

KEY ELEMENT 1: Group Leadership – examples of expected competencies

- Planning and organization
- Screening of participants (as appropriate)
- Communication (clear and effective)
- Ensures that all party members are accounted for periodically and at the trip conclusion
- Respectful, caring, considerate
- Sound judgment and decision making skills
- Establishes trust
- Focuses on group well-being and success as a whole
- Adapts as required / situational leadership
- Teaches / coaches and also learns from others

KEY ELEMENT 2: Technical Skill – examples of expected competencies

- Has experience and physical abilities commensurate with the trip being led
- Practices minimum impact procedures / Leave No Trace principles
- Practices good trail etiquette
- Knowledge and use of 10 essentials for trail running
- Knowledge and use of proper gear commensurate with the trip being led

KEY ELEMENT 3: Navigation– examples of expected competencies

- Effectively navigates trail routes with map and compass and any other appropriate tools to "stay found" (altimeter, watch, GPS, smartphone navigation apps)

KEY ELEMENT 4: Mountain Safety Skills– examples of expected competencies

- Shows good understanding of major summer and winter backcountry hazards and how to assess the level of risk
- Shows good understanding of methods to prevent, mitigate or manage major risk factors
- Shows good understanding of the risks particular to trail running

KEY ELEMENT 5: First Aid and Emergency Preparedness – examples of expected competencies

- Able to handle common first aid situations likely to be experienced on a trail run
- Know the “7 steps of Emergency Response” as described in *Freedom of the Hills*, or an equivalent emergency management process
- Exhibits a good understanding of how to handle emergency situations such as late return/after dark/lost runner/off-route/lost party
- Demonstrates problem solving and leadership skills relating to medical emergencies or unexpected weather and trail conditions
- Knows how to summon help/appropriate emergency agencies to contact

KEY ELEMENT 6: Knowledge of Standards and Policies– examples of expected competencies

- Familiar with applicable Mountaineers standards or procedures such as carpoos; liability; waivers, postings and closings; ratings
- Knows incident reporting expectations
- Familiar with maximum group size, permitting, camping, food storage, and other applicable land management agency regulations

PROCESS TO QUALIFY AS A MOUNTAINEERS TRAIL RUN LEADER

There are two different sets of requirements, depending on whether a club member aims to become a frontcountry trail run leader or a backcountry trail run leader.

Sponsoring committees must have a documented and transparent process, available to any interested member, by which a prospective leader can qualify as a Mountaineers frontcountry trail run leader or as a backcountry trail run leader.

Committees are responsible to verify that prospective leaders are competent in the key elements listed above using structured, objective methods and records..

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Committees have flexibility to use different methods appropriate to individual leader candidates, maintaining flexibility to recognize experience and training from another activity or from outside the club where it directly applies to the key leader competency requirements. However, the committee must maintain a mechanism to document their evaluation of a leader candidate against the key criteria so that any outside party can understand the objective method used to qualify the person.

It is strongly recommended that each trail run leader attend a trail run leader seminar including an

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overview of the minimum standard and all the key leader criteria and expectations, even if they have led other activities for the Mountaineers. Other outdoor leadership seminars offered by the Mountaineers can also suffice, or extensive documented experience as an outdoor leader, in the judgment of the Trail Running Committee.

In addition, because frontcountry trail runs have no prerequisites, frontcountry trail run leaders often have to face much greater challenges in screening participants, ensuring basic preparedness, providing first aid and navigation expertise for the group, determining the appropriate required gear, and managing safety and pace during the activity than leaders of backcountry trail runs or other activities that have significant prerequisites for participation. It is expected that frontcountry trail run leaders will communicate to participants what is appropriate and required for each trip on a trip-by-trip basis. In addition, though the ten essentials are not required for participants on beginner or moderate frontcountry runs, it is expected that the leader of these runs will carry the majority of the ten essentials or have them located nearby and convey what is required for participants to carry on their specific run. For example: the trip leader carries a small, light first aid kit, and also has a more comprehensive kit located in a car at the trailhead.

Frontcountry leader candidacy and process

To become a frontcountry trail run leader, club members must:

- submit an application to the Trail Running Committee
- have completed three (3) or more group frontcountry trail runs, either with the Mountaineers or privately
- Have additional knowledge/badges as outlined below.
- Schedule and successfully lead one (1) mentored frontcountry trail run with an existing trail run leader, as arranged by the Trail Running Committee
- Have a positive mentor report to the Trail Running Committee that they meets the requirements and expectations and is qualified to become a frontcountry trail run leader. Frontcountry trail run leader candidates are welcome to request more than one mentored run.

To receive the Frontcountry trail run leader badge, the candidate must also have these qualifications completed:

- Wilderness First Aid badge
- Mountaineers navigation badge, “found” course
- have participated in three frontcountry trail runs with the Mountaineers or have equivalent experience, as determined by the Trail Running Committee
- Be familiar with the ten essentials and how to adapt them for trail running as well as the trail run leader guide and the trail runner code of responsibility created by the Trail Running Committee

Backcountry leader candidacy and process

To become a backcountry trail run leader, club members must:

- submit an application to the Trail Running Committee
- have completed three (3) or more group runs that would be classified by the Mountaineers as backcountry trail runs (can include mentored runs), either with the Mountaineers club or privately

- schedule and successfully lead two (2) mentored backcountry trail runs (can count towards the total of 3 qualifying runs mentioned above) for the Mountaineers with existing trail run leaders, as arranged by the Trail Running Committee, and
- have additional knowledge/badges as outlined below.

After the mentored run takes place, mentors will report to the Trail Running Committee whether the candidate meets requirements and expectations and is qualified to become a backcountry trail run leader. If the candidate meets the requirements and expectations, the Trail Running Committee will issue a backcountry trail run leader badge for that individual. If the candidate fails, the Trail Running Committee will assess the candidate and make recommendations for improvement so the candidate can, if they so desire, continue to pursue the goal of becoming a backcountry trail run leader.

Notes:

- Previous qualification as a frontcountry trail run leader is not required to become a backcountry trail run leader
- Backcountry trail run leader candidates are welcome to request multiple (more than two) mentored runs

To receive Backcountry trail run leader badge, candidates must also have these qualifications:

- wilderness first aid badge
- Mountaineers navigation badge
- have participated in at least one backcountry and one frontcountry trail runs with the Mountaineers or have equivalent experience, as determined by the Trail Running Committee
- have experience with self-supported group backcountry trail running, as determined by the Trail Running Committee
- be familiar with the ten essentials and how to adapt them for trail running as well as the trail run leader guide and the trail runner code of responsibility created by the Trail Running Committee

Fastpacking leader candidacy and process

To become a fastpacking trail run leader, club members must:

- backcountry trail run leader badge
- submit an application to the Trail Running Committee
- schedule and successfully lead two (2) mentored fastpacking trail runs for the Mountaineers with existing trail run leaders, as arranged by the Trail Running Committee
- Fastpacking Course badge

After the final mentored run takes place, mentors will report to the Trail Running Committee whether the candidate meets requirements and expectations and is qualified to become a fastpacking trail run leader. If the candidate meets the requirements and expectation, the Trail Running Committee will permit leading fastpacking trips for that individual. If the candidate fails, the Trail Running Committee will assess the candidate and make recommendations for improvement so the candidate can, if they so desire, continue to pursue the goal of becoming a fastpacking trail run leader.

Notes:

- Fastpacking trail run leader candidates are welcome to request multiple (more than two) mentored trips

- Candidates must be able to demonstrate adequate gear selection based on expected conditions for themselves and provide guidance to other participants in advance of the trip

PARTICIPANT QUALIFICATIONS

Frontcountry Trail Running Participants

Unless specified by the leader, there is no prerequisite for signing up for a frontcountry trail run. Participants are responsible for signing up only for frontcountry trail run trips that are within their capabilities, wearing suitable clothing and bringing suitable equipment as specified by the leader. The Ten Essentials or other additional gear may be required of frontcountry trail running participants by trip leaders. Trip leaders can also post trips as “leader’s permission required” and screen participants.

Backcountry Trail Running Participants

Participants in a backcountry trail run must either have a backcountry trail running badge (issued upon graduation from the backcountry trail running course or by demonstrating equivalency to the Trail Running Committee) or the trip leader’s permission to take part based upon their judgment of the participant’s skills and preparation. Trip leaders can also post trips as “leader’s permission required” and screen participants, even if participants do hold a backcountry trail running badge. Participants are responsible for signing up only for backcountry trail run trips that are within their capabilities, wearing suitable clothing and bringing suitable equipment as specified by the leader. Carrying the Ten Essentials is expected and additional appropriate gear may be required of backcountry trail running participants by trip leaders.

Fastpacking Trail Running Participants

Participants in fastpacking trail runs must either have the fastpacking trail running badge (issued upon graduation from the fastpacking trail running course or by demonstrating equivalency to the Trail Running Committee) or the trip leader’s permission to take part based upon their judgment of the participant’s skills and preparation. The fastpacking badge requires the participant to hold the backcountry trail run badge as a prerequisite. Trip leaders can also post trips as “leader’s permission required” and screen participants, even if participants do hold a fastpacking trail running badge. Participants are responsible for signing up only for fastpacking trail run trips that are within their capabilities, wearing suitable clothing, bringing an adequate shelter, sleep system, food and bringing additional suitable equipment as specified by the leader. Carrying the Ten Essentials is expected and additional appropriate gear may be required of fastpacking trail running participants by trip leaders.

Related Club-wide Minimum Standards

General standards for all club activities.

Other Relevant Standards

Following a thorough review led by four different members of the standards drafting committee, it was found that no comparable standards for Trail Running currently exist. For more information on the results of the review, please see the document titled “Trail Running Standards Research.” The Trail Running Committee will continue to review possible other standards on a yearly basis.

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