

FAQ About Northern Tier

1. **When do we wear our Class A uniforms?**

You wear your uniform only on the days you are traveling to and from Northern Tier. All other days you'll wear your crew shirt, with your uniform stored in a locker at base camp.

2. **What are the boot requirements?**

Your boots have to cover the ankle, and they have to allow water to drain. Boots with ventilating mesh on the sides to enable the feet to breath, like Merrell Ventilators (~\$100), meet the drainage requirement. Although your boots will remain wet the entire week, once they dry out at home the boots will be fine for hiking. Another alternative is to drill holes in the soles of boots that have no ventilating mesh, but these boots won't later be suitable for hiking.

3. **Do I have to bring a duffel bag?**

A duffel bag is highly recommended, but not required. What you pack your stuff in has to meet the airline's requirements for checked baggage, which means there can't be any loose straps like those on a backpack. Whatever bag you use can't have wheels, and it can't be hard-sided luggage.

4. **I have a tent, should I bring it?**

Generally, no. Northern Tier supplies the tents. But if want to bring your tent, go ahead, and at Northern Tier a decision will be made whether it goes in the canoes or remains in storage at base camp.

5. **Anything special I need to know when buying a dry sack?**

Northern Tier says it should be 25-30 liters, but 40 liters is better. The sack's opening rolls down to fit the contents, so if you've got 30 liters of stuff, the 40-liter sack will roll down and be just as small as a 30-liter sack. Don't spend extra money buying brand name or buying a sack with a compression feature. The Outdoor Products 40-liter dry sack sold at Walmart and elsewhere for \$14 works just fine.

6. **What kind of hat should I bring?**

Your hat should have a brim that fully encircles the head, as you'll be in the sun all day without shade. Baseball-style hats aren't recommended because they don't shade your neck, ears and sides of the face.

7. **Why must my pants be nylon and my socks wool?**

You'll be getting wet a lot (a lot!), so you want to be wearing fabrics that dry fast. Nylon dries fast, as does the polyester crew shirt. Wool socks keep your feet dry and warm because wool feels dry to the skin even when wet. Do not wear cotton underwear or socks in the canoe. The only cotton you should bring is what you wear on the plane and the t-shirt you wear when sleeping in your sleeping bag.

8. **Can I bring my cell phone?**

Yes. You can use your phone when traveling to and from Northern Tier - within reason, don't bury your nose in it and ignore the others. You can take the phone on the water if using it for photos, or you can leave it back at base camp in a secure lock-up.

9. **Will there be cell reception or Wi-Fi?**

On the water, no. In base camp, possibly, but spotty. In the airports you'll have reception. The Dairy Queen in Ely where you eat lunch before reporting to Northern Tier should have reception and maybe Wi-Fi.

10. Will I be able to charge my phone?

Only in airports and in the dining hall at Northern Tier. There is no electricity in the cabins or tents at base camp. If you want to charge batteries while on the water you'll have to bring solar panels.

11. What kind of camera should I bring?

Count on dropping your camera in the water at least once, hopefully not in deep water. Given the risks, consider using a cheap digital point & shoot. If you use your cell phone as a camera, invest in a waterproof case and a lanyard or harness.

12. How many canoes and people in a crew?

Each crew has 3 canoes, with 3 people in each canoe, so a total of 9 people. One of those is the crew's interpreter, employed by Northern Tier (usually a college student), and the other 8 are from the troop.

13. What does the interpreter do?

The interpreter is your guide, teaching you how to do things, making sure you do things correctly and don't get lost, and making sure you stay safe. He or she will remain with the crew the entire trip, and will have his or her own tent and carry his or her things in a personal backpack.

14. Why is the interpreter called an interpreter?

They used to be called guides, but when Northern Tier expanded into Canada, they could no longer use that word because in Canada "guides" are a licensed occupation, and it is a violation of Canadian law to refer to oneself as a guide if not so licensed. Northern Tier chose to use "interpreter" for their guides, even for crews that travel only in U.S. waters.

15. What lakes will we be going on?

There are no pre-set routes at Northern Tier. On the first day in base camp, each crew sits down with its interpreter in front of a big map and decides where they'll go among the 1,000+ lakes in the Boundary Waters. Northern Tier treks are either 7 or 10 nights, with crews on shorter treks being limited to the nearer lakes. But we have a 10-night trek, so our crews will have more options. Arguably, the most interesting route for you is to go west toward the Beartrap River.

16. How far do we paddle each day?

About 15 miles per day, more or less. You have to follow the general route your interpreter filed with base camp, but it is the crew's discretion where to stop each evening.

17. Are there campsites, or do we just camp anywhere we want?

In the Boundary Waters there are established campsites, and you must camp at one of these campsites. Each campsite has a fire ring and a latrine (pit toilet).

18. Do all three people in the canoe paddle?

Generally, yes. That doesn't mean you can't take a rest every now and again, but don't expect to be resting for an hour while the others paddle. The front and middle people paddle on opposite sides of the canoe, and the person in the back adjusts his or her paddling to keep the canoe going straight.

19. Do the same three people stay together in the same canoe the whole trip?

They don't have to - it's however your crew wants to operate. Consider switching around each day,

so everyone experiences canoeing with everyone else.

20. How do we portage - travel over land between lakes?

As the canoe approaches the shore all three occupants get out by stepping into the knee-deep water. Two people unstrap the two packs in the canoe and put them on, then walk out of the water and start hiking on the trail to the next lake. The third person lifts the canoe out of the water and lifts it up and flips it over the head onto his or her shoulders, uses his or her hands to balance the canoe, and walks out of the water and onto the trail. At the next lake, the person with the canoe walks into the water and in a controlled motion flips the canoe back onto the water, and the other two people then strap the two packs back into the canoe and they all three get in the canoe and resume paddling. Usually the three people in the canoe rotate who carries the canoe, depending on ability.

21. How much do the canoes weigh?

The canoes we'll be using are made of lightweight Kevlar and are about 45 lbs. Standard aluminum canoes are about 60 lbs. There's a discount in Northern Tier's fee if a crew uses aluminum, but we paid full price for Kevlar. Some say aluminum rides better in the water, so there are trade-offs by choosing Kevlar.

22. How long are the portages?

Portages typically are only an eighth of a mile or so. But some can be less than 100 feet in length, and others more than half-a-mile. At each portage there is a sign saying how many "rods" length the portage is, with 320 rods equal to a mile (so an eighth of a mile is 40 rods). The map also indicates the number of rods for each portage.

23. Why are they called portages?

In early America, the French were the primary canoe explorers and pelt traders. The French verb "porter" means "to carry," and "portage" (in French the accent is on the second syllable) means "carrying."

24. Are the portages flat?

Mostly not. The lakes are at varying elevations, so you're usually walking up or down at each portage, but they aren't steep slopes.

25. What difficulties might we encounter on portages?

Sometimes trees fall across the trail, so you've got to swing your legs over the trunk one at a time while balancing the canoe on your shoulders. Sometimes the fallen tree is too large to go over, and you've got to go around it, bushwhacking your way through the forest with a canoe on your shoulders. And sometimes there is mud on the path, possibly deep, and you have to slog through the mud with a canoe on your shoulders. You could also encounter deep mud along the lakeshore and in the water, and you'll sink in the mud while maneuvering the canoe and packs. The water above the mud might so shallow that you've got to push the canoe while walking through the mud as the mud is sucking the boots off your feet (keep your boots tied tightly).

26. Between lakes, do we always portage?

Not always. Sometime there is a creek between the lakes and you can paddle through the creek, or if the creek is too shallow, walk in the creek while pushing the canoe through the creek to the next lake.

27. Will we go down any rapids?

No. If a creek between lakes runs fast you've got to get out and portage. Running rapids is prohibited.

28. Will we see waterfalls?

Maybe. But if you do, they probably won't be all that high.

29. How will we disinfect water?

Northern Tier provides Polar Pure, which is an iodine-based solid in a jar. You fill the jar with water and wait an hour. The solid dissolves until the solution reaches its saturation point. Put a capful of that solution in your one-liter water bottle and wait 20 minutes before drinking. When the solution in the jar gets low from usage, just add more water and in an hour it will be at saturation and ready for disinfecting.

30. What kind of food will we be eating?

Regular food, not freeze-dried. You'll have fresh fruits and vegetables, and you'll make dinner using the same types of ingredients you use at home, except nothing that needs refrigeration. There is some flexibility in what food your interpreter signs out from the commissary, so speak up that first day if you want to influence the food choices. If you have food restrictions, take a look at the menu on the troop's website and considering bringing your own substitutes. If you leave it to Northern Tier to make the substitutions, they will charge you an extra \$75. The online roster that the trip organizer fills out has a section to indicate food restrictions.

31. Are there activities, like at Philmont?

No, it's just your 3 canoes in the wilderness. After dinner you can fish and swim, but always with a buddy. If fishing or swimming from a canoe, you'll need at least four people since no one can be in a canoe alone and no canoe can be out on the water alone.

32. What wildlife will we see?

Loons definitely, and you'll hear the loons in the evening. Possibly moose, bears, beavers, deer, bobcats, bald eagles, ospreys and blue herons.

33. Can I fish?

Yes, but a Minnesota fishing license is required. It's best to buy the license online before you leave, since you may not have internet access at Northern Tier to make the purchase. The cost for non-residents is \$5 for those under age 18, and \$43 for an adult 7-day license. If an adult in your crew has a license, those under 16 can fish under that adult's license, but the scouts' catches count toward the adult's daily limit. You can bring your own fishing equipment, or you can sign out equipment for free from Northern Tier.

34. Will there be mosquitoes?

Probably, and possibly a lot of them. They feed on plants, so they aren't out on the water and therefore won't bother you when you are paddling in the canoe. But when you are on land, especially after dinner as daylight fades, you may find it beneficial to wear netting covering your head. Keep your hat on, so the netting doesn't touch your face, as a mosquito can bite you through the netting if the netting is flush against your skin.

35. How wet will we get?

You will frequently be wet, especially your feet. Every time you get into or out of your canoe you'll

step into the water up to your knees or thighs. Your pants and shirt will be getting splashed by the paddles hitting the water. Your boots will remain waterlogged your entire trip. When you stop to camp for the night you'll change into your sneakers, and wear the sneakers the next morning during breakfast. But once it's time to get back in the canoe, you'll put those wet boots back on.

36. Is the water cold?

No. Earlier in the year, yes, but by late June it has warmed up.

37. Do we have to wear a life jacket?

Yes, any time you are in a canoe or in the water. No exceptions.

38. Can we swim? dive? jump from tall rocks?

You can swim, but you are required to wear your boots and life jacket while swimming (yes, I kid you not!). Diving headfirst into the water is prohibited. Jumping is allowed, but only from heights less than 5 feet.

39. Is the Boundary Waters Canoe Area Wilderness open to anyone?

Yes, but a permit is required, and only limited numbers are issued each year. Northern Tier obtained permits for us back in January. The Ely area is home to a number of outfitters that rent equipment and can be hired to lead people to the best fishing and camping.

40. Will we see many other people on the water?

No, in fact there may be days when you see no other humans. The Boundary Water Canoe Area Wilderness prohibits more than four canoes or nine people to be in the same place at the same time, so even if you see other humans, you can't stop and chat, only wave as you pass.

41. Are motor boats allowed?

There are motor taxis on some of the lakes accessible by road. These taxis carry people and their canoes and equipment across large lakes to and from their desired starting or ending points.

42. What is the Grand Portage?

In the 1700s and 1800s, canoes traveled between Lake Superior and the Rocky Mountains, transporting cargo west and furs east, connecting at Lake Superior with ships from Europe. The Pigeon River marks the border between Minnesota and Canada at Lake Superior, and the first 9 miles of that river are not navigable, so this nine-mile portage from Lake Superior to the start of the navigable part of the Pigeon River was called the Grand Portage, the longest portage of the whole trip. You won't be seeing or taking the Grand Portage.

43. Will we ever enter Canada?

Possibly. If you are canoeing on lakes on the border between the U.S. and Canada, when you portage between lakes the trail you are on may actually be on the Canadian side of the border by a matter of several feet, so technically you'll be in Canada. Look for small obelisk-like stone monuments that mark the international boundary.

44. What awards can we earn?

The mileage you cover at Northern Tier will satisfy the miles needed for the 50 Miler Award, but that award also requires that you do 10 hours of conservation work. That can be work you did before or after Northern Tier. Other awards are the Triple Crown Award if you previously went to Sea Base and Philmont, or the Grand Slam Award if you previously went to Sea Base, Philmont

and Summit.

45. What patches can we earn?

There are patches for the distance you traveled (in 25-mile increments up to 200), for monitoring lake water quality, and for duty to God.

46. How do we get evacuated if there is an emergency?

Your interpreter will have an emergency radio or satellite phone, which would be used to call base camp, and evacuation would be by canoe, or by float plane if necessary.

47. If there is an emergency at home, will my parents be able to reach me?

Probably not. The interpreter keeps the radio or satellite phone off, and turns it on only if the crew has an emergency. If your parents call Northern Tier, the most Northern Tier probably will be able to do is to leave a note for you that you'll get when you return to base camp.

48. Are there any big controversies where we are going?

A mining company wants to build a massive copper mine upstream of the Boundary Waters. After years of study, the Obama administration said no, then the Trump administration reversed that decision, then the Biden administration reversed and said no. The reason Obama and Biden said no is the risk of damaging the Boundary Waters if the mine were to have an accident. Do an internet search for more information.

49. What should I be doing to prepare?

- 1) Strengthen your arms and shoulders by lifting simple weights at home.
- 2) On the troop's website, watch the videos and read the documents about Northern Tier (on the home page under Upcoming Troop Activities, click on Northern Tier, and at the end of the outing description click on "Information for Those Going to Northern Tier Is HERE").