

The Buckskin Trail - 1954 to the present

The Buckskin Trail is a long-running training course, unique to the Miami Valley Council, which at its core teaches the Scouting outdoor skills to adult volunteers, as well as how to teach these skills to youth and adults. The current Buckskin Trail course dates back to two similar training courses, each run by separate districts of the Miami Valley Council:

- The Buckskin Trail course began in 1954, under the leadership of Jim Manion, as part of the Northwest District (the northwestern portion of Montgomery County). Jim recruited a staff of "Buckskinners", who taught outdoor skills to students during a weekend course at Cricket Holler held each spring. Graduates of the course were awarded a white, cloth neckerchief with a buckskin fringe. A second session was held in the fall, and the spring graduates were invited to return as instructors. Those that participated were awarded leather neckerchief slide in the shape of a buckskin. The fall course was discontinued in 1959, and graduates could serve on the staff for the following year's course to earn their slide. Earning both the neckerchief and the slide meant that the Scouter was now a "Buckskinner".
- A second course, known as the Thunderbird Training Course began in 1960, sponsored by the Salem District. Different course directors led this course each year, but less is known about the history of this course.

In 1963, the two courses were merged, under the title of the Buckskin Trail, and under the leadership of Jim Manion, the original Buckskin Trail Scoutmaster. The white, buckskin-fringed neckerchief was retained as a symbol of graduating from the course, but the recognition for serving on staff for the first time was switched to a thunderbird-shaped neckerchief slide (known as the "Thunderbuck") was issued to commemorate the old Thunderbird training course.

The staff and participants for the course are organized as a Scout troop, with participants becoming members of new Scout patrols, and staff serving as troop guides, inside and outside quartermasters, instructors and all troop officers. The troop number is Troop 315, the compass heading for northwest, to commemorate the Northwest District, which first sponsored the Buckskin Trail. The staff is led by a Scoutmaster and by a Chief Thunderbuck, who acts as the institutional memory for the course. The first Scoutmaster, Jim Manion also held the Chief Thunderbuck role during his tenure. Other Buckskin staffers served as the Chief Thunderbuck for the second Scoutmaster, Chuck Gardner. When Chuck Gardner stepped down, he took on the role as the Chief Thunderbuck, and since that time, the past Scoutmaster is invited to take on the role of Chief Thunderbuck when he steps down. In addition, a Senior Patrol Leader is elected each year for a one-year term for the following course. The Senior Patrol Leader then appoints his or her Assistant Senior Patrol Leader. As with any troop, the minute-by-minute schedule is run by the Senior Patrol Leader and the Assistant Senior Patrol Leader, who also conduct all Patrol Leader Council sessions. At the end of each yearly course, the Assistant Senior Patrol Leader becomes the sole candidate for election as Senior Patrol Leader. Details of personnel over time are listed in the Buckskin Tail History, prepared initially by Ken Hutchinson and later edited by senior staff members for each year's course.

The purpose of the course was originally to teach the outdoor skills that new Scoutmasters need to run a successful outdoor program and teach their scouts for advancement to the First Class rank. As new official training requirements were added by BSA, the course was modified to meet or exceed these standards. National BSA visited the Buckskin Trail in the late 1990s, and used information from the

course in developing the Fundamentals of Training curriculum for Scoutmasters. In the early 2000s, the course was modified to match or exceed standards for the new Introduction to Outdoor Leader Skills (IOLS) curriculum, and continues to be modified as the IOLS curriculum changes. For the 2009 course, additional classes were added to also cover the requirements for the Scoutmaster/Assistant Scoutmaster Leader Specific Training as well. With more Cub leaders taking Buckskin Trail, the course was modified to include the OWL curriculum in 2015, the BALOO curriculum in 2016, and the new combined OWL/BALOO curriculum for the 2018 training course. Buckskin Trail also supports the council Wood Badge courses by advertising the courses as they are being prepared, and hosting Wood Badge Bead Ceremonies for Buckskin staff who choose our course for their ceremonies.

Typically, the Buckskin Trail course consisted of several evening or Saturday preparation sessions for the staff to prepare each year's course (including the Fundamentals of Training course), one or more Wednesday evening sessions and possible outside patrol meetings, and two Friday evening to Sunday noon camping sessions at Cricket Holler. Extra sessions needed for the BALOO/OWL course are held on Sunday afternoon of the first weekend, for those wishing for that training. As described in the history, the exact sequence of the sessions of the Buckskin Trail has varied, in accordance with the need to comply with training standards. Patrols of participants were formed on the first Wednesday of the course, each advised by a Troop Guide (who was a staff member). Each patrol was responsible for selecting a patrol name, as well as any "spirit items" (neckerchiefs, slides, patrol cheers and songs) to establish their identities. The Troop Guides served as a kind of model patrol, as did the Inside Quartermasters, the Outside Quartermasters, and occasionally the Instructors. In this way, the activity of a real Boy Scout troop, consisting of multiple patrols was modeled and taught.

For many years, a "Model Camp" teaching more advanced Scout outdoor skills was taught to the patrols on the second weekend, which was usually very well received. Over time, the skills taught in the Model Camp were moved to the first weekend of the course, so that most of the outdoor skills were taught on the first weekend, and the participants had a chance to demonstrate these skills on the second weekend. To the greatest extent possible, all skills were taught using the EDGE Method (Explain, Demonstrate, Guide and Enable). As an example, cooking skills were taught on the first weekend, and the patrols then cooked for themselves, and staff visitors the second weekend. This not only applied to outdoor skills, but also to troop management skills. Participants were taught how to run a regular troop meeting, and then each patrol designed an example troop meeting plan. One of these plans was then selected by the staff, and the selected patrol ran that planned troop meeting during the second weekend. The staff Chaplain and chaplain's aide prepared an interfaith service during the first weekend, and the patrol chaplain's aides planned the service for the second weekend. The training philosophy for the entire course was to learn by doing, and by participating to the greatest extent possible.

This philosophy extended to the evening campfires. Each patrol, participant and staff, was responsible for a song or skit for the first weekend "fun" campfire. A "spirit log" observational game was also conducted, and returning staff members were teased if they had yet to learn the secret of the spirit log. Occasionally, first-time course participants volunteered to demonstrate whether or not they understood the game, and were successful. For the second weekend, the evening campfire was more ceremonial, with each participant gathering twelve pebbles during the day, walking the Scout Law Trail alone to the campfire site, and deciding whether he or she was living by each point of the Law. At the final campfire, the Buckskin neckerchiefs were ceremonially awarded to the participants, the

Thunderbuck slides awarded to first-year staff members, and when needed, new Scoutmasters were commissioned.

A new innovation was added in the 2014 course, advancement. Requirements for Scout, Tenderfoot, 2nd Class and 1st Class ranks were developed, and participants worked on these ranks together as patrols. They each got to experience going through Scoutmaster Conferences and Boards of Review (done as a group), so that all participant patrols had earned their First Class rank by the end of the course. The Star and Life ranks could be earned individually by staff members in following years by continuing to serve on the Buckskin Trail staff, teaching skills on the course, recruiting other participants, and serving on other council event staff positions. The highest rank for participants is the Pathfinder Award which involves additional service and recruiting, as well as completion of a portfolio showing the influence of applying Buckskin Training to their unit or district positions. The name Pathfinder Award was selected to avoid the name of the Eagle Scout rank.

Participants of the Buckskin Trail generally rate the course very highly, noting especially that the course teaches its lessons not only by instruction, but by letting them demonstrate what they have learned in a patrol and troop setting. Many note that they were reluctant to take the course due to the time commitment, but then ask for how they can get to spend more time with their fellow patrol members, who they generally had never met before the course. A significant number go on to take the council Wood Badge courses.

The Buckskin Trail has another great advantage, and that is the friendships that develop outside of a participant's or staffer's unit or district. Staff members who keep returning year after year are the council's best-trained trainers, and represent all of the districts within the council. Patrols are also made up of members from several different districts, several types of units, and with all levels of Scouting and outdoor experience. The friendships that develop within patrols, within the troop each year, and that get reinforced when participants return as staffers helps foster a broader vision of Scouting that encompasses the entire council. Indeed, most staff at council and district activities is made up of Scouters who have taken Buckskin Trail, or earned their Wood Badge beads, or both. One of the methods of training listed in the Fundamentals of Training course is a "Center of Excellence", a location or program where an extremely high level of training and commitment to the Aims and Methods of Scouting are presented. For the Miami Valley Council, the Buckskin Trail is our Center of Excellence.