

# WILD WOMEN

By Bernadette LaManna  
photos by Kelly Stang and Mary Bailey



 ever gotten frostbite, been lost in the woods, or eaten a live grub? These are some of the questions asked of the participants in the Becoming an Outdoors-Woman (BOW) program, sponsored by

the New York State Department of Environmental Conservation (DEC). BOW teaches women who have little or no outdoor experience some of the skills necessary for safe and rewarding outdoor pursuits.

This is my second time attending BOW, and I'm taking classes in archery, canoeing, GPS and survival at a wonderful facility on Lake George. My younger sister, who has attended several more BOW workshops than I, is accompanying me this time. I joke that the biggest challenge we'll face is to avoid getting on each other's nerves. (Fortunately, we're not in any of the same classes.)

Before getting down to business, we assemble for lunch at communal tables. This is difficult for me; I'm not shy, but I have a hard time making small talk with strangers. In this case, my sister's gift of gab, which sometimes drives me crazy, is a blessing. BOW attendees range in age from young adults to what I like to call us "mature" individuals, and everyone's outdoorsiness varies. I'm a little self-conscious about my polished nails ("Nantucket Mist"), but relieved as others confess to bringing irons and hair dryers.

After lunch, my first class is Beginning Archery. Our instructors, Al and Cora, teach us about archery's history and terminology and how bows and arrows are constructed. They demonstrate how to use the equipment and talk about various kinds of competitions. We even "make" our own arrows, which we get to keep—talk about an authentic souvenir!

Interesting as all this is, I'm wondering when we are going to get started because time is running out. I can't wait to get my hands on one of those snazzy compound bows or a graceful recurve bow.

Finally, we head outdoors, and I get to use a bright-yellow compound bow I've been eyeing. Trembling from the strain, I try desperately to maintain good form—right arm fully extended and hand lightly gripping the bow, left elbow in line with my ear and three fingertips pulling the bowstring taut. I release the arrow. Ouch, that string scraping my fingertips hurts, but my pain quickly turns to pleasure as the arrow hits home. Well, not exactly home, but at least it made it to the neighborhood—that is, the straw surrounding the actual target.

Time and again, I aim and fire, my shots gradually and consistently getting closer to the target. Hey, this is fun! It's also tiring. Approximately 90 minutes of practice later, I wonder whether my shoulders and fingers will function the next day. I'm weary, but happy, and head off for a brief rest before dinner.

After eating, my sister and I check out raffle items and products for sale in the cabin where everyone gathers for the evening's activities. Kelly Stang, lead coordinator for BOW, officially welcomes the crowd and talks about BOW's history, instructors, sponsors and students, past and present. Kelly—a wildlife biologist for DEC—also awards prizes for a variety of things and encourages the audience to buy raffle tickets, especially for a hot-pink kayak, which is a real eye-catcher.

At 8:00 p.m., three different programs are offered, one of which is about white nose syndrome in bats. The presenter, a petite blonde, looks to be about 12 years old, and



(opposite page) BOW classes teach women of all ages a variety of tips, techniques and skills necessary for safe and enjoyable outdoor experiences. Participants in the Survival Skills course learn how to build a makeshift shelter, like the one pictured here.

(Bottom right) Classes like Beginning Archery are not only educational, they're fun. Participants practice shooting, and also make their own arrows to keep!

we're stunned to learn she's a neuroscientist. Following her impressive slideshow, I head to bed.

Saturday morning dawns all too soon, and I'm a little groggy. A couple of cups of black coffee set me straight. My shoulders and fingertips have recovered, and Beginning Canoeing beckons. The sun is dazzling in a brilliant blue sky, and the lake is clear enough to see several feet down. I'm raring to go again, but first, our instructor, Meg, has a few things to say about the rudiments of canoeing. She also tells some stories, including one about a burly male friend who could be heard across the water "screaming like a little girl" when he spotted a spider in his canoe. We all chuckle, though a few shudder at the thought.

In addition to clip-on flashlights that Meg gives each of us to keep, she has bags full of appropriate clothing (i.e., not cotton), as well as footwear and sunglasses to loan to anybody who forgot theirs, and she provides snacks and beverages too. My canoeing partner, Carol, and I choose life vests and a couple of kneeling pads. If I didn't know better, I'd think we were going to reenact the Lewis and Clark expedition.

As advised, Carol and I bang loudly on our overturned canoe to rout out any critters taking shelter underneath. Then we turn it right side up, carry it to the side of the dock and lower it into the water. We manage to get into the canoe without mishap, a promising start.

After semi-synchronizing our paddling, we make our way around another dock to the inlet where we've been told to congregate. We're sharing the lake with a group of kayakers, their colorful vessels eclipsed only by the lead kayaker's pink boa. No worries about losing track of her!

Meg wants us to switch places with our partners so that each of us can try paddling both fore and aft. Canoeing alone, she pulls up parallel to the shore and adroitly steps out of her craft. We're closest to her and decide to follow suit. After all, how difficult can it be? With one foot still in the bow, I plant my other foot firmly on the sand, intending to steady the canoe so that Carol can get out too. But my plan quickly goes awry.

The canoe begins to drift ever so slowly away from shore, and the distance between my feet is becoming uncomfortably wide. I try to catapult sideways back into the boat, but the foot that's on shore doesn't make

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Beginning Canoeing may seem intimidating to some, but participants (like the author, pictured here, left) quickly learn that with focus and attention, canoeing is an easy and enjoyable way to experience the outdoors.



During the popular Beginning Shotgun course, women are given a hands-on opportunity to learn how to safely handle and fire a shotgun.

it and winds up in the lake instead. The water's surprisingly tepid, but that's little consolation. Where did we go wrong? As it turns out, we should be perpendicular to the shore so that I can jump out and then pull the canoe in farther for Carol's exit. Foot wet and lesson learned, we switch places, re-enter the water, try different paddling techniques and admire the view.

It's early autumn in the Adirondacks, and the foliage is tinged with a little color, all the more vivid against a sapphire sky. The air has the barest hint of nippiness, and despite the number of people on the water, there's little noise. Wet foot aside, I could die happy here and now. All too soon, we return to the dock and replace our canoes and other borrowed equipment before heading off to lunch.

"Why are you eating so fast?" asks my sister. I tell her that I don't want to be late for my next class, which I'm anxious to begin. She, on the other hand, confesses to having second thoughts about hers, which is Kayaking. I don't understand why she's nervous; I personally would have no misgivings under the watchful eye of an instructor. Besides, if it doesn't go well, my sister's a good swimmer, so what's the problem? Inexplicably, she also signed up to take Next Step Kayaking where she'll learn how to roll the boat. She can't remember why, but seems resigned to her fate. She's nuts. Away we go.

I'm about to start Beginning GPS, which I assume is a more modern version of Map and Compass, a class I

took during my first BOW weekend. That didn't go so well for me, and were it not for others, I'd still be lost in the Catskills. I soon realize that in this class, we're going on a high-tech scavenger hunt, a.k.a. geocaching. Huh? Our instructor, Cate, hands us each a GPS, presents a brief slide show and provides the "coordinates." What the heck's a coordinate? Isn't that when your accessories match your dress?

We're searching for items hidden specifically for us to find, and told to look for things in the woods that don't seem normal. I'm a little confused until I spot a bunch of sticks piled in a way that just wouldn't happen naturally. Then I see a pile of rocks that look like a mini-Stonehenge. One more clue, and we (that is, everybody else who's figured out how the GPS works) locate the treasure.

It's only 5:00 p.m. or so, and I'm bushed but looking forward to the evening's festivities. These include a silent auction, samples of fish and game prepared outdoors by students in the Fish and Game Cooking class, a slideshow of all of us in action, the awarding of more prizes and awards, and the drawing for the hot-pink kayak. As before, our chairs are piled with numerous small gifts, compliments of various vendors and sponsors. We're full of good cheer (and supper), and we're pumped. Most of us have shed our awkwardness with each other, and we're developing a common bond through new experiences and small accomplishments.



## Don't Miss the Upcoming Winter Workshop

NYS BOW is holding a winter workshop from January 29-31, 2010 at the Rensselaerville Institute in Albany County. During this weekend, nearly two dozen classes will be offered, such as snowshoeing and ice fishing. In addition, NYS offers Beyond BOW workshops, which focus more in depth on a singular outdoor activity. Please visit DEC's website at [www.dec.ny.gov/education/68.html](http://www.dec.ny.gov/education/68.html) for more information about BOW opportunities.

BOW is a non-profit program which offers workshops and trips that are reasonably priced to enable many people to take advantage of them. Upon inquiry, a few scholarships may be available as well.

For further reading, see: Girl2Women in the June, 2002 issue of *Conservationist*.

As I wait for my chance to snag some fish and shop for a few BOW products, my picture flashes up on the screen. There I am, learning how to determine my dominant eye for archery. And hey, there's my sister in her Field Dressing and Handling Game class posing with—wait, is that a dead bear? And my sister's smiling! Did I mention she's nuts?

My final class the following morning is Survival Skills, and my fellow students and I hunker down in an unheated building, the cold penetrating even the multiple layers that we all wear. Already, our mettle is being tested. Sue, our instructor, seems unfazed by the chill, perhaps because she's so animated. It's evident that she's confident and capable—the kind of person you'd want with you in an emergency, such as being stranded in the woods. She initially talks about how to avoid life-threatening situations in the first place. However, she knows that even experienced outdoorspeople can get into trouble, and that's why we novices are here—to learn how to be prepared for and cope in a worst-case scenario.

As Sue passes around her homemade survival kit, she explains what's included and why. She also has various first aid kits and cautions us to remember that normally we'd be carrying everything on our backs, so evaluating the size and weight of what we pack is important.

Sue also discusses the importance of dressing in layers and choosing clothing made of almost anything other than “killer cotton.” During all this discussion, she is handing out numerous freebies, from little flameless gizmos for starting fires to packages of beef jerky. It's like your birthday every day here!

Pockets and fanny packs stuffed with treasures, we look forward to warming up under the sun, which has been teasing us through the windows. If we're this wimpy under these circumstances, what are our chances of surviving in the wilderness?

Our first task is to make a fire without matches or a lighter. In preparation, we clear a patch of ground that's not near anything flammable. There's been little rain lately, making it easy to find a variety of dry, natural fuel—moss and leaves, twigs, bark, even the “silk” from milkpods. Using a knife, we take turns scraping a piece of magnesium (from the emergency kit) close to the pile of fuel. A few strikes on a flint and it isn't long before there's a spark, which develops into a small flame. As we add more tinder, a little fire erupts, making us proud. We don't need no stinkin' matches! We extinguish the fire and move on to our next challenge—building a shelter.

A tree that has fallen at an angle provides a convenient starting point. We lean sturdy branches from the forest



Participants of BOW survival classes learn important safety lessons necessary for wilderness survival, including what and how much to carry in a backpack.

floor close together along both sides of the tree and construct a roof by overlapping pine boughs, which we also use to cover gaps in the sides of the shelter. In addition, Sue shows us how to weigh down a tarp or poncho—which can be used as a roof too—by tying rocks into the corners of the fabric with string from her survival kit. Mounds of dried leaves serve as both insulation and bedding. The shelter looks cozy, albeit small, and we're surprised that it accommodates two of us with a little wiggle room besides.

Although there's much more we could cover—edible wild plants for example—it's nearly lunchtime already. I return to finish some last-minute packing before we eat and head home. My sister's changing into dry clothes after she successfully learned how to roll her kayak that morning. She accepts my congratulations with aplomb, the previous afternoon's terror apparently forgotten.

The weekend has been educational and enjoyable and makes me wonder why I waited so long to attend another BOW workshop. I feel ambivalent about returning to civilization, especially as the traffic thickens. I'm already considering signing up for BOW's winter program...

Oh, and that question about eating live grubs? Of the two women who admitted to having done so, one was my sister. Why am I not surprised?

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