



—Women learn outdoor skills at Becoming an Outdoors-Woman events

By Merycarol Roods

Photos provided by Becoming an Outdoors-Woman program

I've always considered myself an outdoors girl.

I remember my grandmother telling me never to stay indoors when you can be outside, and I've followed that advice as often as I could. While my professional life generally kept me indoors, I spent as much of my "off-time" as possible pursuing hiking, skiing, biking, camping or even doing lawn work. Housework would get done on a day when I had nothing else I really wanted to do.

As I got older, I thought I knew a lot about most outdoor activities. That is, until I attended a Becoming an Outdoors-Woman (BOW) workshop where, over the course of three days, I was introduced to a myriad of new activities relating to the outdoors, some of which I always wanted to try but never had the opportunity to, and some I had never even imagined. (Who knew you could make a camping stove out of a couple of soda cans?)

Sponsored by the New York State Department of Environmental Conservation, BOW workshops focus on learning outdoor skills—skills often associated with hunting and fishing, but also useful for many other outdoor pursuits. The workshop I attended included women from 20 to 90 years old and from all walks of life. Some, like myself, had a lot of outdoor experience, and others had very little, but we all had something in common: there were outdoor activities we had not experienced and wanted to give a try.

Oftentimes, women don't get involved in some outdoor activities because they don't have the necessary equipment, don't know what they might need, or don't want to spend the money on equipment they may never use again. And, even in today's progressive times, the reality is that some women won't

get involved in a number of traditionally male-dominated activities because unless they know a man who's involved with an activity—and who is also willing to share the experience with them—it can be very difficult to get started. That's where BOW comes in.

New York's BOW program is a way for women to learn new outdoor skills (useful in both summer and winter) and undertake new adventures in a non-threatening

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and fun atmosphere with others who are also anxious to learn. More than 40 different classes are generally offered—from canoeing, camping, and survival skills, to archery, knot-tying, and fish and game cooking. There are beginning firearms and basic fishing skills classes, and almost all equipment is provided. There is even an opportunity to earn a NYS Hunter Education Certificate or Trapper Education Certificate as part of the workshop.

The three-day session allows for four, half-day classes. The instructors are volunteers who are anxious to share their knowledge with attendees. Their

enthusiasm for their subject is contagious, and you can't help but enjoy yourself while you're learning a new skill.

My first BOW weekend was held in the summer at a facility on Lake George. My experience started with a class called Essential Wild Edibles which taught us the five essential wild edibles you need to know should you become lost in the woods. We had the opportunity to search outside for bark, roots, stems, berries and leaves.



Learning to identify edible plants is one of the skills taught at BOW workshops.

It's amazing what's out there when you know what you're looking for, but it's just as important to learn what to avoid.

At dinner, everyone discussed what they learned that afternoon and shared humorous stories about incidents that occurred while trying activities such as kayaking, fly casting and muzzleloading for the first time. Following dinner there was the opportunity to browse through the many prizes that we had a chance to win, including camping and hiking gear, life jackets and fishing gear. Several vendors were also present, selling a variety of outdoor-related items.

Workshop participants could also partake in any number of mini sessions held in the evening. A hands-on firearms class was offered, which provided an introduction to guns and safe gun handling—a great overview for those taking a shooting course over the next two days. Other options included a seminar on how to dress for comfort and safety in the outdoors, and an entomology slide show presented by a fly tying and fly fishing instructor.

I spent pretty much all of the next day on the lake with a Beginning Canoeing class in the morning and a Solo Canoeing class



Students learn to properly identify a variety of wild plants.



Participants can learn a number of outdoor survival skills, including starting a fire.

in the afternoon. Our Beginning Canoeing instructors went over the basics of safety and equipment: what to do and even more importantly, what not to do (such as standing in your canoe or shifting your weight too quickly). Then we took our gear, picked a partner and a canoe, and embarked on our journey across the lake. As the instructors showed us the proper techniques for paddling, it seemed pretty easy and straightforward, but putting that instruction into actual use and trying to synchronize strokes with your partner was a little challenging at first. Like with anything, however, a little practice makes perfect (well almost). Getting back to shore brought another challenge: exiting the canoe without ending up in the water. But, with expert guidance from the instructors, we succeeded. All in all, it was a great experience.

Solo Canoeing was also fun, though a bit more challenging. Solo canoeists use double-bladed paddles (like kayakers). The double blades allow you to rhythmically paddle on both sides of the canoe, avoiding bringing the paddle back and forth over the canoe to constantly correct

The kayaking class is popular with many participants.



your course. Session participants had the opportunity to try out the newer, extremely light solo canoes, which are wonderful for paddling a series of lakes where you have to portage (carry) your canoe and gear over land between ponds.

At dinner that night we had the opportunity to taste the wonderful dishes prepared by the students of the Fish and

Game Cooking class before being treated to a slideshow of the workshop sessions. It was great looking at the images of all these women (amazingly they seemed to capture everyone) as they: shot a rifle for the first time; learned how to trailer a boat or camper; or caught their first fish.

Mini sessions included a hands-on, firearms-cleaning class and a demon-



Participants in the Fish and Game Cooking class prepare a meal for everyone to try.



Women can learn to shoot a rifle at a BOW workshop.



One participant proudly displays her paper target from the Beginning Rifle course.

Join Us!

New York generally offers one BOW workshop each summer, as well as an occasional one in the winter. Workshops are held in a variety of settings; this year's summer workshop was held at a facility in Silver Bay on Lake George in the Adirondacks. There are also a number of BOW-sponsored events that provide women the opportunity to experience a variety of outdoor activities, including camping, hiking, hunting, canoeing and kayaking.

For more information on BOW (including attending a workshop or event), visit DEC's website at www.dec.ny.gov/education/68.html. Also, read "Wild Women" in the December 2009 *Conservationist*.

stration of various trail cameras, which use heat or motion sensors to take pictures of wildlife in action. It was a full evening which, on top of a long and active day, had most participants tired and ready for bed.

After breakfast on Sunday, I headed off to my final and most exciting class: Beginning Rifle. Although some of the

students were starting to show signs of fatigue from the past two, action-packed days, our instructor, Jackie, was full of vim and vigor. First, she covered basic information on types of rifles and their capabilities, before spending considerable time on proper safety practices. Then it was off to the shooting range, where we donned ear protection and took turns shooting. When it was over, we proudly took our paper targets as mementos of our accomplishments.

Lunch on that final day was spent chatting about the weekend's events. While I still considered myself a fairly skilled outdoors girl, my weekend made me realize how much more there is to learn. And as I listened to the many conversations around me—how much fun people had, how much they learned, and making plans to meet up in the future with newfound friends—I was struck by how many of the conversations turned to one topic: when the next BOW weekend would be held.

Merycarol Roods lives in upstate New York and enjoys spending time paddling, hiking and cross-country skiing in the Adirondacks.



Two participants give a thumbs-up after successfully setting up a tent.