



# Demystifying *the* Outdoors

**A city girl overcomes some misgivings and finds fun and success in *Becoming an Outdoors-Woman***

**T**To me, playing outdoors means bringing my iPhone with me to the mailbox. Hunting is finding the best strawberries at the farmer's market. And the closest I generally come to fishing is reeling in some fresh sushi at Whole Foods.

I grew up in the city, raised by parents who grew up in the city, so the world of outdoors recreation has always been foreign to me. Mysterious. Exotic. And, honestly? Kind of scary.

So attending the N.C. Wildlife Resources Commission's *Becoming an Outdoors-Woman* weekend last April near Columbia, N.C., was eye-opening. And maybe a little bit life-changing.

*Becoming an Outdoors-Woman*, or BOW, is a nationwide program that has been offered in North Carolina since the mid-1990s. It aims to give adult women hands-on experience with the activities that many send their husbands, boyfriends or brothers off to do on weekends.

But women can shoot. And women can fish. And women can back a boat trailer into the water. And once they try it, a lot of women like it.

So each spring, the Wildlife Resources Commission offers a three-day weekend BOW Workshop for women who want to get a little dirt underneath their fingernails and learn about the great outdoors firsthand.

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(From left, clockwise) Classes at the BOW weekend in Plymouth included Sound and Pond Ecology, Advanced 3D Archery, Intro to Sea Turtles and Marine Mammals (bottom picture also), Intro to Bird Watching, Basic Shotgunning and Intro to Archery.



**“It’s really nice, I think, being in a community with all women,” she said. “The activities are great, but meeting people and finding out their stories and who they are, for me, is what I enjoy as well.”**

People sign up for the workshop for lots of reasons, said BB Gillen, outdoor skills coordinator for the Wildlife Commission and the coordinator for North Carolina’s BOW program.

“A lot of them say, ‘My husband hunts and I want to go with him, but I’m not comfortable yet, so I want to get more familiar with the sport,’” Gillen said. “A lot of them come for the camaraderie with the other women. They meet people and then they find someone that they can go hunting with.”

For \$225 a person, attendees can choose four classes from a long list that covers pretty much anything you can imagine in the outdoors. There are classes that offer information and hands-on practice with firearms, archery, fishing, digital wildlife photography, wilderness survival skills, kayaking, rock climbing, ecology and more.

The location of the BOW weekend varies; it’s held some years in the mountains, and other times toward the coast, with class offerings tailored to match the outdoors activities enjoyed in each region.

“It’s like summer camp for grownups” is how I heard several folks describe it. The Eastern 4-H Conference Center that housed the 2012 weekend sure felt that way. The women attending slept in bunk beds and shared a bathroom. Meals were served in a

dining hall (when it wasn’t served from a campfire to people in the Game and Outdoor Cooking class), and the whole thing was set on Albemarle Sound, nestled amid wetlands and forests marked black from a recent controlled burn.

I went to summer camp when I was a kid, so I was ready for the bunk beds and the race to hit the showers before the hot water runs out. But at my summer camp, I took the arts-and-crafts classes.

Is it possible for one weekend to convert a city girl into an outdoorswoman, I asked Gillen before heading to the workshop.

“It happens all the time,” she assured me with a smile.

I have to tell you that I don’t like guns. Before BOW, I had never touched a gun. My only experience with guns was having one pointed at my face during a robbery in downtown Raleigh. I repeat: I don’t like guns.

So of course I signed up for the Basic Pistol class.

But first I had to take Introduction to Firearm Safety, a prerequisite for anyone taking a shooting class who hasn’t previously had safety training or shooting experience.

The instructors covered the basics first, emphasizing that very most basic of basics: Don’t point the business end of a gun at anything you don’t want to get shot.

From there, we learned about how guns and bullets work, the history of firearms, and types of guns. We also got into gun semantics. Is a “firearm” always a “weapon”? Admittedly, I’d always felt the terms were interchangeable, but I was starting to see a distinction.

The next morning, I tromped across a dewy field to the shooting range for my pistol class.

Two tables at the front of the range held the collection of pistols we’d be working with. They ranged in size from a “bad little rascal,” as the instructor termed it, no bigger than the palm of my hand, to something with a barrel so long it came with a monopod you might want to use to prop it.

There was a review of safety measures, an overview of the pistols we’d be using and a discussion of gun accessories on the market—including locks, gun safes and an amazing number of contraptions for concealing pistols in all sorts of places on a person—and then it was time to shoot.

The first gun I tried was a .22, at the suggestion of a more experienced classmate who took me under her wing. With her help and under the supervision of the instructor, I

loaded the magazine, belted up to the firing line and took a hard look at my target—a white piece of paper with dark black rings to aim for.

I took a deep breath, and then another. I raised my arms, grasped the grip firmly with two hands like I’d been taught, released the safety and... took one more deep breath.

And then, finally, I pulled the trigger. I was braced for the recoil, gentle though it was on this .22. But I wasn’t expecting it to be more of a kick up. But I held on to the gun, even as my classmate pounded me hard on the back and pointed to the tiny hole I’d made in one of the black rings on the target.

“Hey, good job!” she said, smiling. “Wanna do it again?”

As a matter of fact, I kind of did want to do it again. Over the next hour or so, I fired that .22 some more, then tried a .38 Special, then a Glock .357. I also tried that “bad little rascal,” which definitely seemed to pack more of a punch than its tiny frame would suggest.

After about an hour of shooting, my arms ached and I was starting to get a headache from all the noise. But I was also proud of myself, and I found myself looking at all those pistols arrayed on the table in a new light. Fear gave way to something more like

respect. Not so much for the guns themselves, because those, after all, are just basic machines—a point driven home to me during the safety class and my time on the range. But I gained a new understanding of people who choose to own and operate a gun. And even more respect for those who choose to do so properly.

After morning classes, everyone convened in the dining hall for lunch. We compared notes on what we had learned, and the conversation turned to why we had come.

Friends Theresa Meetze and Barbara Nevitt were what organizers and participants affectionately call “repeat offenders,” attending their fourth BOW workshop in nine years. This time, they brought along Nevitt’s sister Peggy Eberle for her first try.

“It’s a good getaway,” said Meetze, 52, who lives in Williamston. She ranked the opportunity for fellowship with other women high on her list of reasons to return. At the halfway point of her first workshop, Eberle was inclined to agree.

“It’s really nice, I think, being in a community with all women,” she said. “The activities are great, but meeting people and finding out their stories and who they are, for me, is what I enjoy as well.”

Each said they tried to tailor their classes toward learning something new.

And Nevitt, 59, from Greenville, offered proof that knowledge, as they say, is power.

“I never touched a gun ‘til 2003, here, and now I have my own shotgun. I wasn’t raised with guns, never was around guns, so now I’m not afraid of guns,” she said. “Until you get your hands on them and see that they are safe and you’re properly trained on them, you’re afraid of something before you get to know about it.”

BOW workshops offer an open, nonjudgmental environment, they said, to women who aren’t afraid to get their hands dirty and who have the desire to learn.

“Nobody thinks you’re weird here because you want to skin a deer,” Nevitt said.

My next class involved something far less fearsome to me than guns, but not much more familiar: fly-fishing.

Like many of my classmates, I walked into the classroom envisioning golden-hued scenes from “A River Runs Through It”—and, it turns out, that’s not so far off the mark. If you live in Montana and happen to have Brad Pitt as a fishing buddy, that is.

What I loved about fly-fishing, at least the way our instructor approached it, was that it’s so simple. You can fuss about gear



On page 24, classes shown are Rifle Markswomanship, Shotgun and Motorboat Skills. At left, the author enjoys her time in Basic Pistol. Below left is Bowfishing. Below right are three generations of BOW participants profiled in the sidebar below.

**“I really want to get a bow and start doing some of that outside of this,” said Siefers, 26. “... It doesn’t cost too much to get into, you just have to get up and go do it. I think this will really give me the motivation because I can see that I can do it.”**

and technique if you want to, but you can also just get out there and do it.

Most of our class time was spent assembling our rods and getting some casting practice on a windy field. That, however, is no way to catch anything, so we, as a class, made a decision to be late to dinner and head out to a nearby pond to see whether anything was biting.

It wasn’t, but nobody was complaining. It was nice to be outside and alongside a fishing buddy or two, enjoying a little conversation but mostly the sounds of nature and the feel of the sun on our faces on a warm spring day. And that, it occurred to me, is a large part of what outdoor recreation is about. Most of us no longer rely on catching a fish for survival—we can just head to a restaurant if the fishing hole is a dud. But some people find that life feels a little bit better when we get back to nature every now and again.

In pistol class I got to appreciate the sight and sound of a bullet moving through the air, and while fly fishing I learned how to interact with the water. Now it was time to get acquainted with dirt. And poop.

Trapping, Tracking and Trekking started in a classroom, but we didn’t stay inside for long. After studying handouts comparing animal tracks and pondering preserved chunks of animal scat, we headed out to the edge of the sound to look for the real deal.

Without our guides, I might never have noticed the faint animal tracks in the sand. And I might have stepped right over (or, with my luck, into) the dark pile of scat left on a fallen log. But in stopping to ponder these things, our group was able to piece together stories of the region’s wildlife. A raccoon heading for a drink, a possum searching for food. Some sort of ... something ... feeling the effects of a meal of berries.

After spending more time than I ever thought possible studying scat, we located a possum that had wandered into a trap our instructor and some students set the night before, watched a demonstration of how to set up a beaver trap in a shallow creek, and then moved to dry land to practice the fine art of setting a coyote trap. In the last few minutes of class, we tried our hand at radio telemetry, sort of a high-tech scavenger hunt to find dummy animals outfitted with transmitter collars.

All of the activities boiled down to one thing: if you want to find an animal, you have to know how it lives. And there are plenty of clues out there, if only you know where to look. And where to step.

A few bunks over from me in the cabin was Andrea Siefers, a Raleighite who found out about the BOW workshop through a Google search for ways to fulfill her New Year’s resolution: learning some practical skills, especially if they were “outdoorsy.”

She stacked her schedule with archery classes, and halfway through the weekend she could already tell she had started down the path to a new hobby.

“I really want to get a bow and start doing some of that outside of this,” said Siefers, 26. “It sounds like something really reasonable, you know? It doesn’t cost too much to get into, you just have to get up and go do it. I think this will really give me the motivation because I can see that I can do it.”

And that, right there, is the magic of BOW. It takes the mystery out of outdoors activities and brings them into the realm of the possible. It takes every myth of hunting and fishing and cooking with fire being “man’s work” and kicks them in the butt



with a ladies’-sized boot. It takes a city girl, in my case, and gives her a taste of the backcountry.

So did that taste convert me into an outdoorswoman? I’d love to tell you that I’ve been hitting the gun range every weekend, that I caught a trophy trout and that I became the hero of my neighborhood after trapping a nuisance coyote. But none of that happened.

Here’s what did happen: On the drive back to Raleigh after the last lunch and some hugs goodbye at the BOW workshop, I caught myself eyeballing creeks that crossed under the highway and wondering if there were any good fishing holes nearby. The following weekend, I noticed the faint sound of shots coming from a shooting range near my favorite park and thought, “Well, if I ever do want to do that again ...”

And often after that weekend in April, I’ve found myself noticing wild-animal poop along the sides of trails or the edge of the woods when I’m walking my dog. And I don’t mind telling you that now I stop and inspect it. It might not be a conversion, but it’s a start. ♦

*Stacy Chandler is a freelance writer who lives in Garner. This is her first story for Wildlife in North Carolina.*

## BOW can be a Family Affair

Once people get bitten by the BOW bug, they tend to return year after year—and they often bring a friend or family member.

Arlene Crane of Lexington, N.C., who at age 79 was attending her sixth BOW weekend in 2012, first persuaded her daughter to come along four years ago. A year after that, one of Arlene’s granddaughters signed up. And now five women representing three generations of the family eat, learn and play together at BOW. Arlene; her daughter Ellie Crane, 56, of Fredericksburg, Va.; daughter-in-law Ana Crane, “from the ’50s,” of Greensboro, N.C.; and granddaughters Kelsey Pullen, 24, of Richmond, Va., and Jill Howard, 25, of Dallas, Texas, see BOW as a chance for the type of family reunion that lets this active family be, well, active.

“I’d say our family is outdoorsy,” Arlene said, backed up with vigorous nods from her relatives, who listed camping, boating and skiing as activities the family has done together before. BOW, they said, offers a chance for them to try new outdoors activities, like shooting and archery.

But most of all, they enjoy the chance to be together. “I’ve been really happy that the girls have had this to do with their grandmother, because I don’t think there are too many grandmothers at this point that want to do that,” Ellie said. “It’s a very fun memory to have, for me and my mom, and me and my kids.”

But they’re not done recruiting. Ellie mentioned a niece in Wisconsin who’s a likely candidate to attend the next BOW weekend, and from there a brainstorm of other adventuresome female relatives flowed.

—Stacy Chandler