

Doing It Themselves

At Becoming an Outdoors-Woman workshops, women learn how to enjoy the outdoors without relying on others

By Becky Lomax

In an outdoor pavilion at the Lubrecht Experimental Forest Conference and Meeting Center, 30 miles northeast of Missoula, I'm with a group of women swapping stories about the obstacles that prevent them from learning more about—and fully enjoying—Montana's outdoors. "My husband keeps buying me fly-fishing equipment and taking me out with this cool stuff," says one woman, laughing. "But he has no idea how to teach me to fish." Another summarizes the frustration of women with overly helpful spouses. "I've been fly-fishing for 40 years but never tied my own leader," she says.



The women, ranging from their mid-20s to their mid-60s, are in a class learning the basics of fly-fishing. Over the next three days, we and several dozen other women from all walks of life will participate in a Becoming an Outdoors-Woman (BOW) workshop. In addition to fly-fishing, we will learn how to shoot a bow, fire a rifle, handle a canoe, administer emergency first aid, and other basic aspects of hunting, fishing, and camping.

Dr. Christine Thomas, a professor of natural resources at the University of Wisconsin, came up with the Becoming an Outdoors-Woman concept. Her research in the late 1980s found that the biggest barrier keeping women from enjoying outdoors recre-

ation was a lack of supportive learning opportunities. Since BOW began in 1991, roughly 150,000 women have participated in weekend workshops in 40 states and three provinces. Montana's BOW Program, run by Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks, began in 1994 and has reached more than 1,000 women.

"Most men learn to fish, hunt, camp, and canoe as boys from their dads, older brothers, and uncles," says Liz Lodman, Montana's BOW coordinator. "But many women never get the chance to learn how to clean a fish, fire a shotgun, or start a campfire. We give them that chance."

The Leap

Most of the 50 other women I've joined this July weekend are strangers. A few came in pairs, but most of us signed up on our own. One woman received the course as a present from her brother. A grandmother has come to learn skills to teach her granddaughters. An outfitter hopes to learn more techniques to use in her business. And one participant wants to learn about fly-fishing—but not from her husband.

At registration, we don name tags that include where we live and which 4 of the 17 offered classes we've signed up for. Like-minded participants, identifiable by their tags, flock together and begin chat-

ting. Most are from western Montana, though easterners have trekked over the divide from Billings, Livingston, and Havre, and several are from out of state. Each year the BOW workshop moves to a different location around Montana. Though participants may camp, most stay in inexpensive cabins and lodges at the workshop sites.

In addition to the comfortable accommodations, there's plenty of tasty food. We're not eating hardtack here. The Dutch oven cooking class makes delicious hors d'oeuvres for social hour, and the Lubrecht conference center's kitchen staff whips up generous portions of lasagna, fajitas with guacamole,



LIZ LODMAN

BIRDING BEGINNERS Participants in a BOW class learn to identify raptors and other winged wildlife. Primarily taught by women, BOW workshops provide a supportive setting where women can learn the basics of camping, fishing, and other outdoors skills.



BOW'S GOAL Anne Bryan of Bozeman, here landing a Yellowstone cutthroat caught in the Gravelly Mountains, exemplifies what BOW aims to produce—women with the confidence and skills to enjoy the outdoors on their own.

grilled chicken, and sesame Chinese salad. The food—along with the lively conversation—energizes us for the work ahead.

Knot That Hard

Fly-casting class begins with us learning to tie on a hook with a cinch knot, and we all squint while copying our instructor's demonstration. Next, we head outdoors to begin casting lessons.

Some in our group look like they have been fly-casting their whole lives. Janet West, a seasoned angler from Swan Valley, gracefully sends her line out 50 feet from where she stands. West has taken the fly-casting class at several previous BOW workshops. "I learn something about fly-casting every time," she says.

The rest of us laugh as we get the hang of flinging the plastic-coated fly line through the air. Instead of flies, we are using tiny wool tufts tied to our line. Those of us who occasionally hang up the wool tuft in our hair understand why we're not using real hooked flies.

Instructor Kay Roos and her daughter and fellow instructor Kathie Roos patiently show us how to move our fly line so it goes where we want it to. We don't remotely look like the experienced fly-casters on the nearby Blackfoot River, but the Rooses aren't about to say so. Instead, they encourage each of us, raising an elbow here, straightening a floppy wrist there. Right about when my arm feels in need of pain relievers, everything finally clicks, and I send my wool "fly" soaring 10 feet farther than I ever thought I could.

Tanya Lemons of Frenchtown says she plans to return home and continue practice casting in the backyard.

"Now I don't have to wait until camping with the family to fly-fish," she says. "I feel confident I can take my kids to the river for some fishing after school."

After watching the mother-daughter instruction team, Joyce Henderson of East Helena realizes the outdoors is not just for fathers and sons. "Moms and daughters can go on that fishing trip, too," she says. Henderson adds that age doesn't need to be a limiting factor, either. Her BOW course on canoeing was taught by older women. "Some

of the instructors were in their 60s and had not started canoeing until they were in their 50s," she says. "They were lively, outgoing, and not afraid to take seven novices in canoes down the Clearwater River."

Balls and Arrows

"Poundage is not important," says archery instructor Cherrie Angel. "Accuracy is." What she means is that if archers can aim well, they don't need a powerful bow—measured in pounds of pull—to shoot targets or hunt. With inspiration that eyesight matters much more than arm strength,

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the other participants and I grab our bows. First, we fire arrows into the distance, a few of them drilling into the ground with a satisfying *thwang*. Later, on a shorter range, we shoot at targets. To improve our accuracy, the instructors help us with our stance and position. "Pretend like you're squeezing an orange with your shoulder blades," says Angel as we draw our bows to the anchor point, elbows out, palms down.

After we've shot the targets full of holes (and missed several targets altogether), Angel pulls out a bag of plastic basketballs. As she rolls them along the ground and tosses them into the air, we attempt to hit the moving targets. It's nearly impossible, and cheers break out whenever someone's arrow actually hits home.

Dutch Oven Cooking

Though temperatures have climbed to 95 degrees outside this afternoon, 13 women crowd around nine Dutch ovens, cooking the hors d'oeuvres for the evening's social

hour. In covered cast-iron pots topped with charcoal briquettes, we're cooking chicken hot wings, pineapple au gratin, grouse cacciatore, venison rancheros, and cheesecake brownies. Many of the participants own Dutch ovens but nod in agreement when one woman admits, "I haven't a clue how to cook in it." Under instructor Marian Stratton's guidance, we partner up to prepare our dishes according to time-tested recipes. After chopping, dicing, measuring, mixing, and stirring ingredients, we haul the food-filled pots outside. The smaller Dutch ovens are no problem, but the big ones take two of us to lug outdoors.

Wearing welding gloves, Stratton moves hot briquettes around the pots to adjust the heat. Periodically, we sneak peeks inside, a difficult feat with the heat and weight of the lids. Whiffs of fragrant chocolate and the smell of venison browning in onions and garlic make our mouths water. A few participants joke they expected to starve during this weekend of "roughing it," but it's obvious no one will go home hungry.

Through the Night

While I learn to cast a fly, fire a bow, and cook cacciatore, another group of women takes outdoors self-reliance to a higher level. They are learning to read a map, use a compass, administer first aid, and even survive overnight in the wilderness.

Tammy Royer of Stevensville knows how easily companions can get separated when outdoors. She once had to find her way back to camp alone after becoming separated from her hunting companions. The fear of being lost prompted her to sign up for the BOW class on wilderness survival.

"I realized I needed to take care of myself and not expect my husband to help me out," Royer says. "When reading a map, all I could tell was north, south, east, and west." Instruction in map and compass paid off as she and her BOW partner successfully navigated a cross-country field course.

After learning how to build a fire, select proper equipment, and prepare a pack, Royer and the others in her class spent a night outside in brush shelters they built themselves, equipped only with what they could take in a day pack. "We wore large plastic garbage bags to stay warm," she says. "It's amazing how much heat they



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GROUP SUPPORT Researchers have found that women have fewer opportunities to learn about outdoor activities than men do. In Montana, the BOW Program has filled that need since 1994 with fun, supportive workshops where women discover the pleasures of outdoors recreation. Clockwise from upper left: mastering the basics of fly-casting; cooking meals and hors d'oeuvres in a Dutch oven; using a compound bow to fire arrows into a target; learning to use a compass; surviving the night using tarps for blankets; building a campfire; cleaning and butchering a deer; and hunting pheasants as part of an advanced-education course called Beyond BOW.



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CINDY MARSHALL

keep in." Hefty bags aren't as warm as sleeping bags, however. At sunrise, it took little encouragement to get the group back to the lodge, where warm coffee awaited. Royer says the night wasn't the most pleasurable of her life, but "it's a good feeling to know I could do it on my own if I had to." Once home, Royer went shopping for essential survival gear. She bought a wilder-

ness compass, maps for fall hunting trips, and several different fire-starting devices. In early fall, before heading off on her first bowhunting trip of the season, she tucked a large black plastic bag in her day pack—just in case. Summing up what many women feel after participating in a BOW workshop, Royer says, "Now I feel confident I can take care of myself." 🐾

Montana's BOW workshops run throughout the year and offer classes on bird-watching, upland bird hunting, deer and elk hunting, kayaking, and more. For information call (406) 444-2615 or go to the FWP website (fwp.mt.gov) and click on "Education." For information on BOW programs in other states and in Canadian provinces, go to www.uwsp.edu/cnr/bow.