

# BECOMING AN OUTDOORSWOMAN

By  
Robert D. Sopuck

While on Alberta's Bow River last year I could see my wife, Caroline, fly-casting gracefully about 100 yards downstream from me. "She's finally got it," I said to myself. But when I approached her spot, Caroline's response to my compliment of "Great casting!" was a frosty "Thanks. I finally figured it out. Now get back to your own pool." What! All I did was say how good she was casting but I soon realized that this little vignette exemplified a big problem in the great outdoors, namely the barriers to hunting, fishing and the outdoors experienced by many women.

Dr. Christine Thomas, a professor from Wisconsin, found that participation by women in outdoor pursuits is low. Barriers included a lack of teachers, societal pressures, fear of firearms, family responsibilities, the outdoors as a perceived male domain, and a general feeling that women are "out of place" hunting and fishing.

The result of Dr. Thomas' work was the popular course called "Becoming an Outdoorswoman" which is designed to teach outdoor skills to women. Manitoba has been at the forefront of this movement since 1994 when the first "Becoming and Outdoorswoman" course was held. Spearheaded by the Manitoba Wildlife Federation, with the Federation's able and talented Darlene Garnham as the "sparkplug," the course has become the hottest ticket on the Mother's Day gift list. True to tradition, this year's course was held on the Mother's Day weekend and was, according to Darlene, "Simply the best!" Over 72 women, including many mother-daughter teams, participated. The course filled up so fast that some, regrettably, had to be turned away.

According to Darlene the course emphasizes cooperation, eliminates peer pressure, and welcomes any and all questions, no matter how basic. All the courses are taught by experienced and very patient instructors, some of whom have been with the program since its beginnings in 1994. "It's the instructors who make it happen," said Darlene.

With Darlene as the only staff person, course organization relies on a core of dedicated volunteers. This year Nancy Lintott, Alma Thiessen, and Diane Wiebe, all spouses of key Federation leaders, filled those roles. And with the lineup of events and variety of activities one can appreciate the work of the organizing committee.

This year's course was held at the Circle Square Ranch located south east of Austin, Manitoba. The students could choose from a wide variety of classes which included: archery and bow-hunting, beginning shot-gunning, marksmanship, fly fishing, camp cooking, "reading the woods," and orienteering. All were equally popular said Darlene. The course costs \$175.00 for everything. One of the great bargains of all time!

Some were nervous about firearms but after the mandatory safety lessons they became more confident. And as they actually began target shooting the students realized that shooting was not only challenging but a lot of fun. Over the years many students, according to Darlene, have gone on to become avid hunters. Eleven of the women took their Canadian Firearms Safety course as well. All passed with flying colours. Actually,

why shouldn't women shoot and hunt? After all, it's no accident that Diana, the Goddess of the Hunt, is female.

"All of the students have been very keen," said Darlene, "And we had to put our foot down in order to keep on schedule since they would have been there forever asking questions!" Darlene noted that the camp cooking class was a real winner. Each student sampled/cooked 4 or 5 different dishes and wild game was used wherever possible. This class was used to feed the entire student contingent. "We cook up tons of food!" said Darlene. Many of the students had never tried wild game and expected the meat to be, well, "gamey." Darlene chuckled at this one and said that after one taste they couldn't get enough of wild food.

Laura Eberling, a nurse and farmer from south of Brandon, is a five-year veteran of the course and exhibits a strong passion for the outdoors. "I'm really an outdoor person," she said. "Being outdoors makes me feel real." She went on to say that "Initially I wanted to learn about shot-gunning, marksmanship, and archery but I kept going back to expand my skills." Laura really enjoys deer hunting and, after going "deerless" for her first three years, has managed to put venison on the table every year after. She and her husband (who does not hunt, by the way) enjoy cutting and packaging the meat and even make their own jerky. Laura is an instructor in her own right and, for the last few years, has introduced a number of young people to hunting. "Becoming an Outdoorswoman" has been very positive for Laura Eberling and she says, "I've had an excellent time each year and would highly recommend the course to any woman interested in learning outdoor skills."

The weekend is much more than hunting and fishing. Mini-classes are taught in such areas as building bird houses, wood carving, fly tying, bird identification, outdoor photography, medicinal plants and traditional healing, and survival skills. They even show you how to back up a vehicle that has a boat trailer attached! Raffles and door prizes, donated by a group of generous sponsors, rounded out the weekend to the delight of all the students.

Darlene became thoughtful when I asked her to summarize the weekend. "It's difficult to pin it down," she said. "You just have to be there to experience it."

If you are interested in "Becoming and Outdoorswoman" just call Darlene Garnham at the Manitoba Wildlife Federation office at 1-204-633-5967. Next year's course will be held on the Mother's Day weekend and, according to Darlene, some women have already registered for 2003. It looks like "Becoming an Outdoorswoman" has become a permanent Manitoba tradition!

*Robert D. Sopuck is a Vice-President with the Delta Waterfowl Foundation ([www.deltawaterfowl.org](http://www.deltawaterfowl.org)), a member of the Wildlife Information Network of Manitoba.*