



Breakfast in bed? Not for them

Ranch workshop teaches outdoor skills for women

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By Shel Zolkewich

SHE could have opted for breakfast in bed this morning. There's no doubt her two young sons, Tyrell, 7, and Jesse, 4, would have concocted an impressive morning meal for Mom, complete with Count Chocula cereal and Hershey's chocolate milk mix.

But instead of following tradition, Petra Haertel of Winnipeg is spending Mother's Day with her friend Trish Wedge, a St. Andrew's mother of two, at the Circle Square Ranch, a little south of Austin, where they are learning to become outdoorswomen.

"There were three points that attracted us here," says Haertel. "Learning to fly-fish, sleeping in a covered wagon and actually having a Mother's Day without the kids."

She adds, only half-jokingly: "I really didn't want to have to clean up the mess they made while making me breakfast." Haertel saw an ad for the Becoming an Outdoor Woman (BOW) weekend workshop and urged Wedge to come along. Haertel felt it was important to have some outdoor skills she could pass on to her two sons.

Wedge's husband is an avid hunter and fly-fisher who's never quite got around to teaching his wife the secret of the cast.

After a few hours with a professional instructor, Wedge was delighted with her results.

"I really enjoyed that," she said, even though she tangled herself and a few fellow workshopppers up on more than one occasion. "It's a lot different when you are being taught by an instructor who really knows how to teach," she said. Throughout this Mother's Day weekend, Haertel and Wedge will learn to tie their own flies, pick up a few backwoods survival skills and learn how to use electronic gizmos to find their way into the woods -- and back.

"The biggest problem is trying to figure out which courses to take," said Haertel. "There should be more of these weekends so we can learn about all this stuff."

Manitoba organizers will say goodbye this afternoon to the 75 women who took part in the 10th annual BOW workshop in Manitoba. When the program was launched in Wisconsin in 1991, it was offered through the University of Wisconsin-Stevens Point.

Today it is available in more than 40 states and several Canadian provinces. More than 80 weekend-long workshops are held across North America annually. The program's workshops introduce women to hunting and shooting, fishing, and non-harvest sports like backpacking, photography, outdoor cooking and orienteering.



In 1994, the Manitoba Wildlife Federation (MWF) became the first non-profit group to offer the workshop in Canada.

Darlene Garnham, who has been with the MWF for nearly 20 years, recalls pitching the idea of hosting a BOW weekend to MWF executives.

"They instantly said, 'This is an excellent program. Go for it.'" The first workshop attracted just under 25 participants. But before too long, Garnham and her committee were filled to capacity and turning women away each year.

The MWF swallows much of the costs for the weekend. Participants get two nights of accommodation, seven meals and morning-till-night instruction from top-notch teachers, all for the bargain price of \$175. All the instruction comes from volunteers. Garnham says there are several sponsors, including the Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation, the Manitoba Big Game Trophy Association, local conservation groups and private businesses that donate merchandise that is raffled off to raise funds.

"With those funds we've been able to buy equipment like fishing rods, backpacking equipment and firearms that are suitable for women. They aren't oversized bows or guns that are too heavy," Garnham said.

After firing several rounds from a .22 rifle, Heather Elsey of Winnipeg joined the group at a nearby picnic table. She's having as much fun this weekend as she did on her first BOW weekend two years ago. Once again, she's made the trip with lifelong friend Jane Toffan-Turnbull.

"I'll tell you why I'm here," said Elsey, who has no children of her own but plays aunt to big group of youngsters. "I think it's important to be able to teach the children in your life how to do some of these things, and really, it's difficult to pursue many of these skills. This really is a wonderful opportunity."

Throughout the weekend, stories of personal accomplishments, challenges and discoveries are being told at every turn. On a morning that could only be called miserable because of a relentless wind, spitting rain and a temperature that threatens to dip below freezing, one woman pulls the hood of her rain jacket away from her ear and quietly asks the instructor, "What's that?"

She has heard, for the first time, the drumming of a ruffed grouse. Another woman takes a shotgun in her hands and, with her instructor close by, follows a clay pigeon through the sky, pulls the trigger and watches the small disk disintegrate. She's hit the target on her first try. In disbelief, she asks the instructor, "Did you see that?"

With so many outdoors skills under their belts, the instructors could easily resort to offering technical descriptions of equipment or rattling off the Latin names of wildlife species, but they don't. By all accounts, they are there volunteering because they get just as much enjoyment out of teaching these skills as the students get learning them.

"We really try to keep things non-technical because, for the most part, everyone is a beginner and you don't need to get intimidated when you are a beginner," said Nancy Lintott of Sidney, Man., one of the founding members of the BOW committee and the archery instructor.

"If they ask what the wheelie thing on the bow is, I will tell them it's called a cam. If they want to pursue things after the weekend, then of course we help them out in any way we can," said the mother of three daughters, who's been an avid bowhunter for 18 years.

Besides the outdoor skills, there may be something a little stronger that pulls these women to an out-of-the-way retreat -- at the end of a road that's mostly dirt with a little bit of gravel -- on a chilly weekend in May, where they'll probably end up with wet clothes and sore bones.

Lintott says, "I think as kids, many of us have wonderful memories of being at camp because we had fun and made some great friends. This is very much the same thing. There is definitely some bonding that goes on here. People come as sisters, mothers and daughter or neighbours but they all go home as great friends."

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