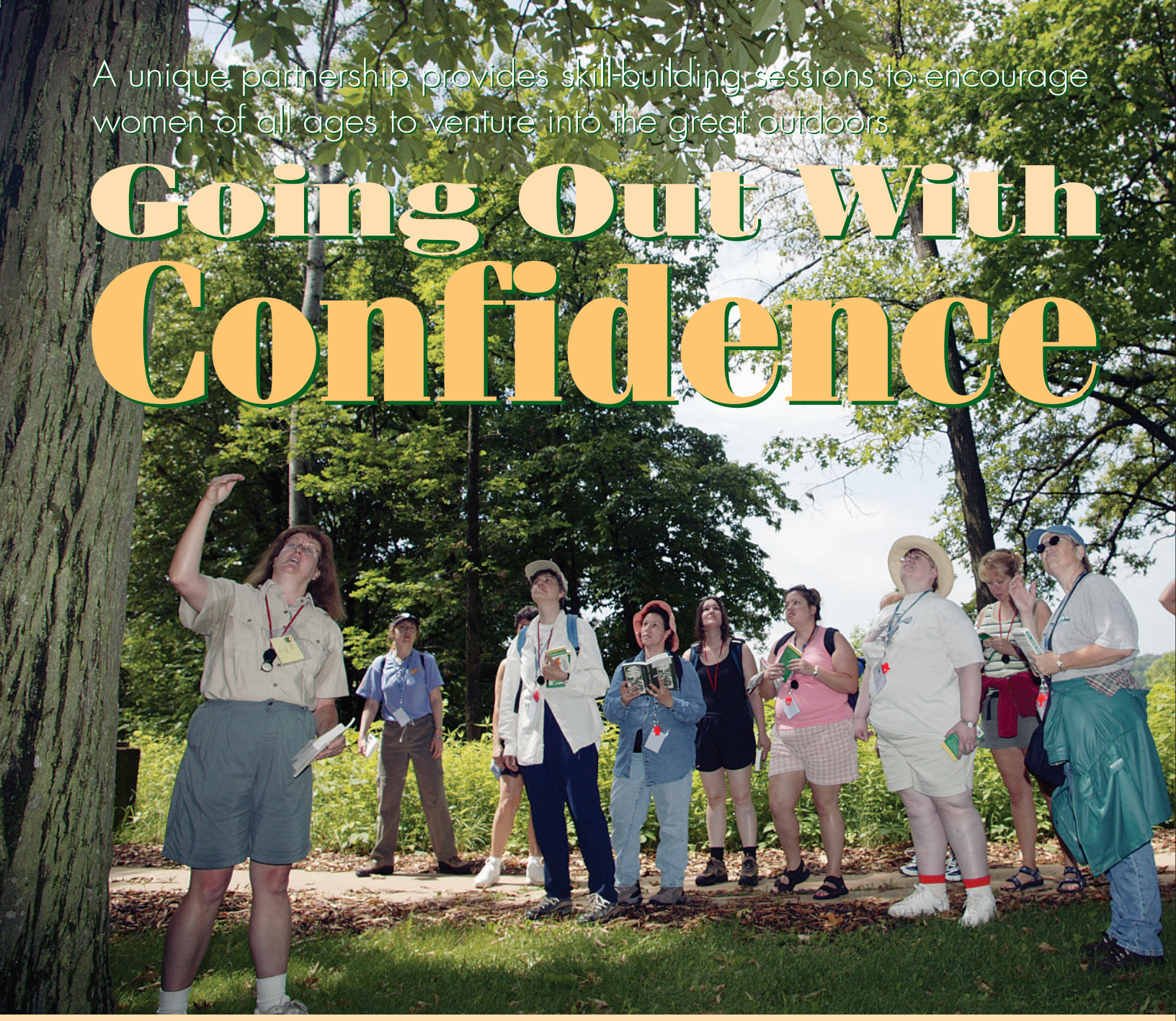
A unique partnership provides skill-building sessions to encourage women of all ages to venture into the great outdoors.

Going Out With Confidence



Story by Carol McFeeters Thompson
Photos By Adele Hodde

A handwritten note accompanied the registration form: "Please put my daughter and me in the same classes. This is our mother-daughter thing to do together."

Some come with a daughter. Others bring a friend. Still others come alone.

All attend a Women in the Outdoors (WITO) event for the opportunity to learn new outdoor skills in a relaxed, non-competitive atmosphere. And, most importantly, all come to have fun.

Women in the Outdoors and Becoming an Outdoors-Woman events are structured to provide hands-on learning opportunities.

Attending an event can be the perfect one-day escape from the typical Saturday chores and errands. When asked why they attend an event, women offer a variety of responses. "A chance to get away," do "something different" and "enjoy the outdoors" are popular answers. Many women participate in activities for the first time at a WITO event. Events provide non-threatening, supportive instructors—a mix of professionals, dedicated amateurs and enthusiasts—providing hands-on, in-the-field direction.

"The Women in the Outdoors program allows the National Wild Turkey

Nature hikes are a popular activity, providing women opting for these sessions a chance to hone skills at tree, wildflower and bird identification.

Federation (NWTF) to reach an entirely new audience—one that has been overlooked in the past—for outdoor sports and conservation," said Rob Keck, NWTF CEO.

The Department of Natural Resources (DNR) and NWTF entered into a formal WITO partnership in January 2004. In that agreement, DNR agreed to co-host two WITO events per year and assist in securing instructors and equipment for others.

Where water is available, a WITO or BOW event may include water safety, boating or canoeing courses.

"The partnership has greatly benefitted the WITO program," according to Cindy Spillman, women's regional coordinator for NWTF. "Staff have been wonderful as instructors, and have helped organize programs at state parks. This partnership allows both of us to fulfill our missions to introduce and educate ladies throughout Illinois to outdoor-related activities."

There is no "typical" participant. Membership is open to all women age 14 and over and draws women from all walks of life.

"You need not be an avid outdoorswoman to enjoy yourself," continued Spillman. "Come and join the fun and camaraderie with other women and experience the feeling of empowerment associated with having attended an event."

Event day at the second annual Weldon Springs State Recreational Area program dawned as one of those golden September days when sunlight takes on that special autumn quality that makes nature seem to glow. Summer greens were fading, but the meadow surrounding the event site at Chautauqua Picnic Area had become a bouquet of sunny yellow plumes of goldenrod accented with lavender and white asters, the air above them alive with soaring monarchs. In other words, it was a perfect, crisp autumn day to be outdoors.

Several classes were offered simultaneously at the DeWitt County event, with two sessions in the morning and two in the afternoon: flyfishing and canoeing were offered beside the park's 29-acre,

Learning how to cook over a campfire provides new skills, great recipes, and most importantly, a chance to sample the menu.

(Photos By DNR Staff)

Counterclockwise from top: Whether the women's event is a day or weekend, a variety of activities may take place, including firearms practice, camping skills, storytelling, bird identification or nature crafts.

spring-fed lake; outdoor photography and nature crafting were tucked into the edge of the mature oak-hickory forest; shotgunning and archery shared the wildflower meadow at The Farm; Dutch oven cooking met at the fire ring at the picnic shelter; and birdwatching included a hike that crossed through woodland, prairie and marsh habitats.

Many women attend WITO events to shoot or become comfortable handling a firearm.

"I wanted to learn to shoot a shotgun," explained one participant, age 52 and shooting for the first time. Another said she attended "to learn to use my new shotgun."

"I am a shooter!" the new shotgunner triumphantly proclaimed at lunch. Two double-session classes offered that day included both safety instruction and overhead clay pigeon shooting. The wing-shooting instructor for that class later proclaimed a perfect record—each participant broke at least one clay pigeon.

Women attending WITO events help support NWTF conservation projects on the local, state and national level—turkey and habitat restoration, scholarships, and as the Weldon Springs interpretive program has experienced, educational materials.

Wild turkeys can once again be heard in the springtime woodlands, and sightings of the wary bird are not rare, after release of 16 birds in the park in 1991. To help area school children learn about a bird that has played an important role in the American heritage, Weldon Springs has received wild turkey education boxes from NWTF. Included in a trap and transfer box, like those used by biologists to relocate wild turkeys, are a bulletin board display, "Return of the Wild Turkey" and "Roll Call" videos, a multimedia CD with turkey sounds, turkey and tracks posters, and activities and lesson plans for use in the classroom.

Contact your local state park or NWTF chapter to learn of wild turkey education boxes in your area.

Women sometimes learn they have skills and like things they never thought they would, surprising even themselves. Asked to evaluate her archery class, a new archer replied "So much fun! I am so glad I did it! (The) instructor (was) very clear, patient and encouraging. Nice hands-on instruction."

A number of women tried flyfishing for the first time.

"Women tend to be better flyfishers than men," the instructor announced at the beginning of the session. "They usually have a better sense of rhythm." Participants in that class became familiar with the equipment and basic principles of flyfishing, learned and practiced casting techniques and watched a fly-tying demonstration.

(Photos By DNR Staff.)

(Photo By Kathy Andrews.)

Traditional hunting and fishing sports are offered at most events, but a variety of other outdoor pursuits are included as well.

Ladies in nature crafting tried several print-making techniques, combining the beauty of nature with their own creativity. They used Gyotaku—a Japanese fish-printing technique that originated about 100 years ago as a way for anglers to document their success—to create colorful and unusual gift bags. Crafters also used found objects such as leaves, seeds and flowers to create note cards and stationery.

"I've been on bird hikes, but this is the first time I feel confident I can do it!" a participant declared after the birding class. Class topics included how to choose binoculars and a field guide, how a field guide is organized and identifying a bird. Identification practice began with cooperatively stationary bird photographs, followed by a hike in search of more active quarry.

WITO participants share a sense of accomplishment at trying something new, learning a new skill and broadening horizons. They leave with a "warm feeling" and new friends with similar interests.

And, as typical with these programs, organizers and instructors receive thank you's punctuated with exclamation points for facilitating a memorable, and possibly life-altering, experience.

Carol McFeeters Thompson is the site interpreter at Weldon Springs State Recreational Area.

Underlying any Women in the Outdoors or Becoming an Outdoors-Woman event is a sense of accomplishment and comradery with new-found friends sharing similar interests.

Illinois offers two outdoor programs for women

Illinois women may develop outdoor skills by attending Women in the Outdoors (WITO) or Becoming an Outdoors-Woman (BOW) programs. Offered throughout the year, both offer women the opportunity to learn in fun, interactive and non-threatening settings, take home new skills and develop friendships with individuals having similar interests.

The WITO program is designed to provide interactive educational outdoor opportunities for women, the conservation of the wild turkey and the preservation of the hunting tradition. Membership in WITO, included in the price of participation in an event, includes a subscription to a full-color quarterly magazine offering information on a variety of outdoor activities, events and more. Visit www.womenintheoutdoors.org for details of upcoming programs.

DNR will sponsor a BOW outdoor skills weekend for women Sept. 16-18 at Pere Marquette State Park in Jersey County near Grafton. Visit www.dnr.state.il.us/lands/Landmgt/BOW/index.htm for more information and workshop schedules and registration forms.

Programs for outdoor women

September			
10	Weldon Springs State Recreation Area	Clinton	(217) 935-0373*
16-18	Pere Marquette State Park	Grafton	(217) 782-7026*
17	Harpole's Heartland Lodge	Nebo	(217) 285-4114
17	Southern Illinois Sportsman's Center	Marion	(618) 964-9102
18	S. Wilmington Sportsman's Club	Essex	(815) 634-4579
24	Argyle Lake State Park	Colchester	(309) 776-3422
24	Max McGraw Wildlife Foundation	Dundee	(847) 428-2240
25	Otter Creek Hunt Club	Jerseyville	(618) 498-9362
October			
1	Jim Edgar Panther Creek State F&WA	Chandlerville	(217) 632-3867*
15	Anderson Lake State F&WA	Astoria	(309) 547-5710

* Hosted or co-hosted by DNR.