Confessions of a Desert Rat

by Linda Dightmon & Kim Kreuzer

It was a challenge. A double dog dare ya kinda thing. “I'll go if you go,” I teased Kim. Eyebrows raised, mocking, knowing...just knowing that there was no way she was going to follow through. Kim takes three down blankets to the Prescott spring BOW. She wears artic grade long underwear in 40-degree temperatures. I have never seen her in anything less than jeans and long sleeve tee shirts even during our 100+ degree desert summers. The woman simply does not like to be cold. There was no way she was going to participate in a winter BOW in north central Wisconsin. But she did, and so did I.

Ten days out and the weather forecast looked promising: sunny with a high of 29 degrees. (I simply refused to think about the lows.) No problem. I have been on big game hunts colder than that. Piece of cake! By the time our plane left Sky Harbor for Minneapolis and then to Wausau, the forecast had changed. Friday and Saturday looked doable but a forecast high of 5 and windy conditions had me well...sweating. It wasn't until we were in the air that I realized that ALL four of Kim's classes were INDOORS! I had chosen 3 outside classes with dog sledding slated for that suspect Sunday morning. I should mention that Kim was born and raised in Western Pennsylvania and was feeling pretty darn smug at this point.

Peggy Farrell, the Wisconsin BOW coordinator, picked us up at Wausau airport. We stepped outside the tiny facility to single digit temperatures. It was cold. Luckily, my hunting boots would not fit in the suitcase so my feet were happy and I was wearing a good coat but my legs, clad only in denim, screamed foul. Kim, of course, was wearing artic grade long underwear. She just smiled and waggled her eyebrows at me. Did I mention that it was cold? The 15-passenger van was stuffed with the paraphernalia needed to execute a workshop for 87 women. We jammed our suitcases on top of the heap (Yes, Kim brought her down blankets.) and settled in for the hour and a half ride to Treehaven. Did I mention that it was cold? The venue for the Wisconsin February workshop was truly a winter wonderland. The landscape looked fresh and pristine in a thick blanket of white. It seemed like whitetail deer were everywhere. We spotted a dozen or so on the ride in. Treehaven is situated on 1400 acres of forest and wetlands crisscrossed with cross country ski and hiking/snowshoe trails. University of Wisconsin-Stevens Point students attend summer sessions here. BOW participants are housed in these dorms.

The venue for the Wisconsin February workshop was truly a winter wonderland. The landscape looked fresh and pristine in a thick blanket of white. It seemed like whitetail deer were everywhere. We spotted a dozen or so on the ride in. Treehaven is situated on 1400 acres of forest and wetlands crisscrossed with cross country ski and hiking/snowshoe trails. University of Wisconsin-Stevens Point students attend summer sessions here. BOW participants are housed in these dorms.

Friday morning dawned gray with a light snow falling. Classes didn't begin until afternoon so we had a fun morning snapping pictures of icicles and snowy landscapes. My legs were now satisfied because they were wrapped in long johns named “Hot Chile Pepper Wool” (Or something like that.) We discovered that we could get from our room to the main building by going outside for only a short distance. We were two buildings away, so we only needed to be exposed for 30 feet or so twice on the way.

My afternoon class was ice fishing. Kim's class was winter camping. I have to correct an earlier statement. The winter camping class did go outside...for about an hour. In the ice fishing class, we geared up, drove to a frozen lake and spent the entire afternoon on the ice. And that is exactly how it should be done. I had a lot of fun in this class. It did seem kinda creepy that we were walking and DRIVING on a lake. Soon, the initial weirdness wore off and I settled down to find out about ice fishing. Prior to this, my knowledge of the sport was limited to watching a movie about grouchy old geezers. The temperature was a balmy 21 and the sun tried to peek through the clouds. Our instructors, Jared Pamperin and Barb Carey, told us many times that it was a beautiful day, perfect for ice fishing. It really was. No one wanted to go in the shack, as it was very comfortable outside.

Technology has infiltrated the ice fishing world. We watched 3-foot muskies cruise around via a fish TV. Jared fed a camera lens shaped like a fish through the ice hole and it watched 3-foot muskies cruise around via a fish TV. Jared fed a camera lens shaped like a fish through the ice hole and it sent signals to a little monitor that sits on the ice. In the meantime we jigged for pan fish through holes that we drilled into the ice. We set tip-ups for bigger fish. We didn't catch any big fish but there was some excitement when the bait tripped the flag.

Back at Treehaven, I found Kim (gasp) outside digging a hole in a snow bank. She explained that they were making Quincy shelters. Some of her classmates were going to SLEEP in there tonight! I was gonna do a double dog dare but wisely backed off. I would have HAD to do it too and the warm dorm rooms sounded pretty good right now.

After a wonderful meal of walleye filets about 80 participants walked out onto a frozen field with Pat Arndt, a local wolf biologist. There is a timber wolf pack near the property. It was...
Later, Kim says, "Oh yeah, I should have told you about that.

around and finally determined that my nostril hairs were frozen! Coming from my nose. Was it something disgusting? I felt I quickly forgot about that because there was an odd sensation noticed was that the snow being crushed under my boots was.

bought some Smartwool undergarments that felt like silk and would keep me warm. (He wants me to go to Alaska….) I have gotten frostbite.

feathers that my nose was purple. She was worried I might have gotten frostbite.

...and finally a forth. With four dogs, it was a pretty fast ride around the snow track and lots of fun. It was pretty easy to forget about the cold if you didn't look at the icicles growing on Steve's mustache. After a while, I noticed that there was a marked numbness in my cheeks. It was time for me to head inside. Kim had spent a nice warm morning cleaning game birds and informed me while stroking a handful of pheasant tail feathers that my nose was purple. She was worried I might have gotten frostbite.

The next day Kim stayed inside and made a fox hat while I went snowshoeing. There was a light snow falling when we started but patches of blue prevailed as the morning progressed. This class really surprised me. I was expecting a lot of hard work trying to stay vertical on giant tennis rackets. What I got was modern plastic snowshoes with a pivoting metal cleat. There is no trick. All you have to do was walk. Our instructor, John Heusinkveld is the assistant director at Treehaven. He took us to some of his favorite places and talked of the different habitats and pointed out the animal tracks. His enthusiasm for his job and this place made the morning interesting and enjoyable.

That afternoon Kim and I had a class together. Yep, indoors. The class was titled fur-bearing ecology. It was all about trapping. I was pleased to see a possibly controversial subject and I wanted to see how it would be handled. One of the rules at BOW workshops is no politics. As it turned out, our instructors did a great job. There was a big pile of pelts on one table and some tramps on another. There was also a selection of practical fur garments like hats and mittens in the room.

They talked about the furbearers that they trapped. Some of which I had never heard of. There is a critter named a fisher. It looks like a giant weasel and has a mouthful of vicious looking teeth. They explained how the tramps worked, how they dispatch or release the animals in their traps and what happens when they trap something unintentionally. They talked a little of the fur market and how it is possible to make a little money trapping. At the end of the class, we skinned a muskrat and a raccoon and put it on a board getting it ready for market. Questions were answered honesty and directly. It always comes down to the instructor to make a BOW class successful. Mark Wolf and Craig Woken did a great job with a difficult subject and it was an afternoon well spent.

That evening the skies were clear and the stars icy bright. It was deemed too cold to venture out. The air temperature was well below minus ridiculous with a wind chill of you've-got-to-be-kidding. And I have dog sledding tomorrow? I accidentally touched a metal door with a damp finger while scooting through the outside breezeways. It was like grabbing dry ice! Kim suggested that I put gloves on, while she waved her gloved fingers at me. Geez, we were only outside for all of 10 seconds. We stayed up late, visiting and giggling with our roommates while sharing a nice bottle of Cabernet.

Sunday morning was gorgeous. The skies were Arizona cobalt and the land was…well…snow white. The wind was due to pick up that afternoon but for now there was still some snow bombs sitting in the trees. The thermometer read –17!!! Determined to experience the extreme conditions, I put on my borrowed ski clothes and ventured outside. The first thing I noticed was that the snow being crushed under my boots was making a most irritating sound, like fingernails on a chalkboard.

I quickly forgot about that because there was an odd sensation coming from my nose. Was it something disgusting? I felt around and finally determined that my nostril hairs were frozen! Later, Kim says, “Oh yeah, I should have told you about that.”