

Spotlight on WILDCATTER RANCH

Outdoor Adventures

THE ARCHERY RANGE AT WILDCATTER Ranch, a 1,500-acre resort ranch near **Graham**, inhabits a sweeping, sunlit valley that could appear in a classic Hollywood Western. I stand here with my feet apart, my knees slightly bent, and I feel my triceps flex as I raise the wooden bow with my left arm. With my right hand, I place the bow string into a notch on my arrow and draw it back to my right ear—my anchor point—with my index and middle fingers. Gazing down the length of the shaft, I release my fingers, and “pshewwwww....Whomp!” My aim is true. I’ve hit my target—a painted foam bulls-eye positioned across the range.

Many people visit Wildcatter Ranch to relax. They luxuriate in the spacious, Western-themed lodge rooms, which boast leather club chairs; wrought-iron



J. GRIFFIS SMITH

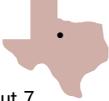
Wranglers at Wildcatter Ranch lead two rides daily; one lasting an hour, another 90 minutes.

and animal-horn beds with sumptuous sheets; and framed stories of Texas legends like rancher Charles Goodnight. They swim in the infinity-edge pool overlooking the serene Brazos River Valley, or enjoy a hot-stone massage or a lavender seaweed wrap at Wildcatter’s cozy spa. Others come to the ranch for the steakhouse, lauded for its award-winning wine list, hand-cut steaks, and seafood.

But this weekend, while I won’t turn my sun-burned nose up at a Swedish massage or glass of Becker Vineyard’s Cabernet, I’m playing sportswoman ...outdoors adventurer. Only my goofy hat and springy-soled cowboy boots reveal me as a city-slicker. Or so I think.

Activities director Don Bates doesn’t disparage my archery skills, but he does put things in perspective. “Well, yes, ma’am, you did pretty well,” he says. “We like to start people off with a short distance, because that gets their confidence up.” Bates also leads ATV tours of the ranch, introduces guests to the sport of skeet-shooting, and arranges canoe excursions on the ranch’s placid Conner Creek. Appropriately bolstered, I’m off to the skeet range, where shooters can take out clay discs released skyward from six different “houses.”

WILDCATTER

RANCH is at 
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After a lesson on how to lock, load, and fire a shotgun, I choose a .410 version, a small gun that doesn't have much kick. As directed, I gear up with earplugs and eye protection, slide two shells into the barrel, nestle the stock against my right shoulder, and holler, "Pull!" A series of orange clay discs soars into the sky directly ahead, and I follow the trajectory with my gun and pull the trigger. The disk falls to the ground intact and shatters. I try again and eventually I get one, the clay target shattering in the sky. Next, I try a 20-gauge shotgun, and the kick takes me by surprise and leaves a raspberry on my shoulder. That explains the red "shotgun hickeys" displayed by the other shooters in my group. "Yes, ma'am....shotgun hickeys... that's exactly what they look like," agrees Bates. "We start the kids off with the little .410, just like the one you tried first, then build their confidence."

Many people come to Wildcatter Ranch to relax, but this weekend I'm playing sportswoman.

So far, I'm learning two things: Most ranch activities depend on confidence, whether it's shooting a shotgun or paddling a canoe. Here's the other thing: Unlike, say, at the grocery store near the University of Texas campus, where being addressed as "ma'am" makes me feel weird, I like it here in cattle-trail country, where drovers and outlaws alike created a romantic Western mythology that survives today in the polite tip of a cowboy hat or a two-fingered wave on the highway.

Over at the Wildcatter stables, head wrangler Jay Brewer not only calls me ma'am, but he confirms my conclusions about confidence. As I bandage an angry scrape on my arm, I asked him why my horse had decided to trot off the trail and run me into a mesquite bush. "Horses look for strong leadership," he says. "If you're not confident when you give 'em a cue, they'll take over as leader." And, echoing a theme I noticed repeatedly at Wildcatter Ranch, where family activities run the gamut from riding and shooting to washer-pitching and tetherball, Jay observed that "kids seem to learn faster and take directions better than adults."

I ask him why. "I think they're not scared of making mistakes," he tells me.

I'll remember that next time I try something I've never done before. —LORI MOFFATT

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