

My Women Hunt™ Journey: April-Marie Mendibles

I first heard about the *Women Hunt™ Experience* at the end of July through my boyfriend, Teddy, who saw the Wild Sheep Foundation's post on Instagram and encouraged me to apply. The dates fell during Fall Break for school (I am a teacher) and I also recognized this amazing opportunity. That weekend we had to travel down to Las Vegas, and on the way, we listened to the Talk is Sheep podcast. Renée Thornton was the guest and she discussed her entrance into the hunting world as an adult woman and the opportunity *Women Hunt™* was preparing for with their *New Hunter Experience*. It was such a thoughtful podcast, and Teddy and I paused it often to discuss the topics on the podcast. I knew I wanted to be a part of this program even more; especially after hearing Renée's vision for women in hunting. I committed to completing the application when I got home and hoped to have a sliver of a chance for this once in a lifetime opportunity.

August 6th was the application deadline and the women selected would be notified August 20th. This is the beginning of the school year for me; *Women Hunt™* was constantly on my mind. I kept hoping that I would have the opportunity to be selected to a part of it. I am taking classes for an additional teaching endorsement and wake up early to do homework before going to work every morning. The morning of August 6th arrived; I checked my email at 5:30 am and was dejected when I did not see anything. Teddy told me to not stress and to give it time, that it wasn't even 6:00 am, and the email would probably come later in the morning. I continued to do homework, get ready for work, and headed to my classroom. About 8:00 am I decided to check my email one more time and prayed for the result I was hoping for. I was beyond elated when I saw *Women Hunt™* in my email and the words, "Dear April-Marie, We are very pleased to advise that you have been selected to attend the *New Hunter Program* course..." I'm not sure I read beyond those words before I screamed with excitement and called Teddy crying to tell him I was selected. Right after I got off the phone with Teddy, I called my parents to let them know I was chosen; they were so excited for me because they knew how much I wanted to be a part of this incredible opportunity.

A few days before leaving for Texas, the team started a group chat so we could message each other and about how excited we all were to be a part of this experience. We were also able to establish and communicate flight times, possibly meeting, and traveling to the hotel together. Fortunately for me, Briella and Stacey were arriving around the same time and we were able to ride to our hotel together. I think we were all so exhausted upon our Texas arrival we were somewhat quiet in the van. Looking back, this quiet time was the calm before the amazing whirlwind we were about experience.

Renée was in the hotel lobby to greet us, with Tim Fallon and Linda Demmer. We chatted with them shortly before we checked into our rooms. We still had a few hours before dinner and decided to go explore a little. Briella and I explored the Alamo which was a short walk from our hotel. As someone born and raised in the desert, I knew my downfall in Texas would be the humidity. Luckily it did not get the best of me. After the Alamo, Stacey met up with us and we started through the River Walk area and stopped for a drink. September 30th was the fourth anniversary of my Uncle Al's passing; he was a major influence on my hunting journey aspirations, so I ordered a Budweiser in his honor.

I don't think I could ever forget our stroll through the River Walk to dinner. It was a different experience than we when we had walked earlier in the day. It was so surreal, I remember Briella and I laughing and saying we felt like we were in an amusement park for a ride rather than going to dinner. Dinner was the first time all the women were able to meet at once and get to know one another. Although this was our

first meeting, we instantly connected on so many levels. I could feel how grateful we all were to be a part of this remarkable experience. The humidity may not have gotten to me, the bugs however; were a different situation. I decided they liked the way Nevada tasted because no one else was attacked on the way back to the hotel besides me.

I am usually a shy person around people I do not know well, and it can take me time to come out of my shell. I felt like we had all known each other for years. It was like we were catching up on lost time rather than meeting for the first time. I found this to be the case in particular with Briella. I'm not sure if it is because we met at the airport or we were just meant to meet and become friends.

The experience we had at the FTW Ranch was life changing for me and I am beyond grateful I was one of the women chosen. It was intense. Renée let us know on our Zoom meeting there would not be a lot of down time and that we would be involved in some sort of learning at all times. Phew, she was not kidding! Once we were settled in our rooms, we met in the classroom and were gifted various items such as our personal bags, gear, and boots (to name a few things) from the amazing sponsors who truly believe in and support *Women Hunt™*, class began.

Although I did not grow up hunting, I did shoot a little bit here and there growing up. I am right handed but did not know I was left-eye dominant until I was thirty and taking my Hunter's Safety Course. When I was taught to shoot, I was taught right-handed. When I prepared for my first hunt last year, I was still shooting right-handed. Our first morning out at the ranch, I started out shooting right-handed because that's how I was taught. I struggled to get a strong focus through my scope because my left eye kept wanting to take over. I decided to just try switching my rifle to my left side to see how that felt. It was a little wobbly at first because I was shooting a right-handed rifle as a lefty but once I got the hang of it, I felt so much better. The struggle wasn't over for me though, when I needed to reload and shoot again, I would lose my target and had a difficult time trying to find my target again. I recall needing to just sit and let myself cool off with my gun when I was about to reach my frustration level (as we say with students). I had never shot this much at once in my life and knew we had more to do. Once I figured out how to shoot left-handed, I was really happy with the change. That night while we were in class, my shooting instructor Fredo, switched me to a left-handed rifle set up. It was a complete game changer for me. I will forever be grateful to Fredo for taking the time with me the next day to make sure I was sighted in and ready to truly shoot left-handed. I didn't realize what I had been missing until the last night when we did shooting drills. I was exhausted but didn't want to miss the chance to shoot at these different ranges (and with this group of friends). That night, my shooting really came together for me as I was able to shoot at various yardages, one after another, with no issues. Talking with Dave (one of the FTW instructors) that night after graduation, he even shared with me how he could see a difference in my shooting and how this was the right move for me in shooting.

I won't forget the butterflies I had on our first night out hunting. Briella and I did "paper, rock, scissors" to decide who would hunt first. I don't remember what I threw, but I won, and was first up to hunt that night. The instructors randomly chose which pairs they would be with to hunt and our guide for hunts would be A.J. I was excited and jittery knowing I was up first, but I felt ready; which was one of the main confidences I wanted to gain through this experience. We drove to our area and hiked to a spot to glass. We were focused on finding whitetail doe and instead we found a very nice whitetail buck. The sun was getting ready to set and we moved to a different spot in hopes of finding doe before the sun set. We found a group of does; they were in a great range. We started to get me ready in shooting position. We

looked through our binos one more time, and realized they may have had ear tags, which we are not able to shoot because these are breeder does. In this time, the sun also began to set, and I recognized it was getting too dark for me to have a comfortable shot. A “successful” hunt may not have happened for me our first night out but I was okay with these results. I was enjoying the experience, the learnings, and the friendships I was building. During my next hunt the following evening, I felt even more confident and ready. A.J had to help with another hunt and Tim Jr. came and met Briella and me. We found a spot where does were known to feed and started to get ourselves in a comfortable position. Tim Jr. went to glass on the hill above us and when he came back, Briella and I had built a house for me to steady myself for a shot and had me ready to shoot if needed. We waited and waited, talked and laughed, and waited some more. The does wanted no part of feeding in the area we were on that night and we packed up and headed back to the jeep. I was bummed out, but not upset or angry. This is the process of hunting, it doesn’t come easy. I learned so much in these five days; more than I ever imagined I could, both about hunting and myself in general. I know where my comfort levels are in shooting correctly now and I am confident in voicing when something is not within my comfort level.

My hunts may not have been successful, but I was beyond excited for the women who were able to achieve successful hunts and apply all the skills we were taught at the ranch out in the field. Once these does were at the ranch we were able to learn even more. The instructors taught us how to cape and debone the does. I have seen animals caped and deboned but was looking forward to being able to try it on my own and learn from the instructors. We were also fortunate enough to have Chef Josh Schwencke teach us how to prepare different game meals. Growing up cooking with my mom in the kitchen, I knew this would be one of my favorite parts of the week. Chef Josh did not disappoint with his knowledge and appreciation of food. He really teaches you how to slow down and value your food and the experience of eating. Since returning home, this is something I have been intentional about when making dinners with our meat shared from this experience and with other meals we have been preparing. We have slowed down and thought about what flavors and seasonings complement one another and are thankful for the meals we are able to share with one another.

Throughout the *Women Hunt™* experience, showing appreciation and gratitude for the animal was a focus of the conversation. This was especially so during our class on the North American Model of Wildlife Conservation and how to have meaningful discussions with those who may not believe in hunting. Fortunately for me, discussing my experiences about hunting and being a part of *Women Hunt™* have all been positive and encouraging conversations. I am lucky in being provided with two mentors: Maureen Hullinger from the Fraternity of Desert Bighorn and Fritz Richards, they have both been in contact with me since my return to Nevada. I am looking forward to finding a time when I can meet with them to share my experience in Texas and discuss my next steps in hunting.

Since returning home, I often reflect on how truly grateful and thankful I am to have been chosen to be a part of *Women Hunt™*. I find myself a bit teary-eyed recognizing how blessed I was to be given the opportunity to gain this level of confidence in myself out in the field and to be a part of the inaugural group of the *Women Hunt™* team. My hope is to continue to grow in this process and develop the knowledge and confidence to mentor a new hunter down the line. Without the Wild Sheep Foundation and *Women Hunt™*, I am not sure I would have the same readiness to be this involved in hunting. This experience has sparked a resolve in me I did not know I had. I want to foster this same resolve in other women, as well as help them to develop the lifelong friendships and skill-building I was able to gain through the *Women Hunt™* experience.