

Not your average day in the park

by John Hewitt

As our nation again is forced to cope with another mass shooting, many who are opponents of gun ownership will use the most recent incidents as fodder for continuing the gun control debate. However, if we talk to those who enjoy target shooting or hunting—even if we are opposed to either or both—it is possible to see the joys this sport brings to many.

I recently experienced archery and air rifle shooting in a controlled environment and found it to be both challenging and entertaining. Though I do not own a gun and am opposed to any weapon that is considered an assault weapon, I understand the pleasure one can experience from target shooting and rifle ranges. There is a great deal of skill involved in being able to hit a target that may be 50-100 yards away, and when one makes contact with the target, even if not in the bullseye, there is a sense of exhilaration that many of us don't experience in everyday life.

The setting was the recently opened Archery and Air Rifle Range at Unicoi State Park and Lodge on the outskirts of the popular North Georgia tourist destination, Helen.

Unicoi's new 15,000-square-foot facility features three practice ranges, two for archery and one for air rifles. The air rifle range features 10 lanes with targets displayed at a distance of 32.8 feet from the firing line. For archers, Unicoi offers a static range that has five lanes with targets of varying distances and a three-dimensional range that allows guests to shoot at lifelike three-dimensional targets such as a buffalo, bear, moose, goat, wild boar and even a couple of prehistoric dinosaur-like creatures. One aims from ground level or from an elevated tower overlooking the range.

Visitors to the range can bring their own equipment and enjoy shooting in a safe environment or take classes from certified archery and air rifle instructors using provided gear and safety equipment. Instructional classes are by appointment only and reservations must be made at least 24 hours in advance.

Unicoi State Park is approximately one and a half hours north of Dekalb County and features rooms and suites in the main lodge, barra cabins, lake-side cabins, RV and tent camp sites, zip lines, suspension bridges, scavenger hunts, mountain biking and a variety of water sports and activities including fly fishing.

To register for instructional classes in archery or air rifle or for additional information on Unicoi State Park and Lodge visit www.unicoilodge.com or email activities@unicoilodge.com.



Unicoi's static archery range features five lanes. Photos by John Hewitt



Instruction is provided by certified instructors



Joseph Skiles aims from the elevated tower of the 3-D archery range



Unicoi's air rifle range



Edie Darden Poché of Athens takes aim with an air rifle