



October 5, 2004

Head South to Warmer Days

By Dennis Gaub for KOA Kompass

Ever wondered if you're a snowbird at heart, especially if you haven't joined recreational vehicle owners in their annual migration to warm locales?

To answer that question, recall your thoughts on that key day every fall when a chilly north wind blows the first snowflakes across your cheeks.

If your mind conjures up images of January or February days devoted to playing golf, lounging on the beach, or shopping and sightseeing in shirtsleeves, then you may be a snowbird in the making.

OK, then how I do get started? is the logical next question. [Several books and Web resources](#) can walk you through important practical issues in preparing for the snowbird lifestyle.

Equally important, according to experienced RVers and snowbird experts, is that you carefully consider your expectations about trading familiar surroundings for living in a winter home on wheels for a month or longer.

To help you, Joe and Kay Peterson, founders of [Escapees, Inc.](#), a Texas-based RV club, have published a booklet titled ["Full-time RVing: Is It For You?"](#)

The booklet discusses how to solve 10 commonly mentioned problems for long-term RVers:

1. Running out of money
2. Being out of touch with family
3. Illness while traveling
4. Inability to handle a large RV
5. Equipment breakdowns
6. Fears for personal safety
7. Cabin fever
8. Being lonely
9. Being rootless
10. Fear of the future

Writer and RV/snowbird expert Gaylord Maxwell offered five basic principles for successful snowbirding in the [Wheel Life blog](#) hosted by the Spokane, Washington, Spokesman-Review. [Maxwell's tips](#) include:

- There is no perfect place, so prepare a list of destinations based on your priorities and interests.
- Make reservations now for January and February because good parks fill up early.
- Don't choose a snowbird park with fancy amenities if you don't think you'll use them. While some parks offer a long list of activities, there's no point in paying at the high end of monthly rental rates – which can range from \$50 to \$350 per month – if you'll use few of the facilities.
- Go where you have friends, especially if you're a new snowbirder, because they'll help you get oriented.
- Don't judge a new area too quickly because even the best areas can have bad days. After sampling areas to find one you like, and then returning there annually, you'll have a built-in community.

Maxwell and his wife, Margie, split their year between a summer home in Deary, Idaho, and a winter "roost" in Yuma, Arizona.

In a telephone interview, Maxwell explained that his tips are based on 50 years of RVing.

"For many of those years, we lived in southern California, and we didn't have to snowbird. When we moved to Idaho, it was with the intention of being snowbirds; for 25 years, we have gone south in the winter," he said.

After snowbirding in all main destinations, "our favorite place has been Yuma, which is one of the major snowbird roosts," he said.

The Maxwells' winter residences have included Florida – the entire state is a snowbird haven – as well as Texas' Rio Grande Valley. ("Winter Texans," what snowbirds are called in the Lone Star State, also have started flocking to New Braunfels, near San Antonio). The Maxwells also sampled the central and southern parts of Arizona. Although they needed no introduction to southern California, it ranks as a popular snowbird destination, too.

Maxwell, whose articles have appeared in RV magazines for more than three decades, has packed his experiences into two books. He shares his knowledge through "Life on Wheels," an independent adult learning program he established that is offered through the University of Idaho. More information is available at [RV Life on Wheels](#), an organization he founded that educates RV consumers.

Maxwell said it's difficult to get a reliable estimate of the snowbird population, largely because of the mobile nature of snowbirds.

"You don't have to worry about being arrested for the wrong statistics," he said, and he offered some of his own.

"If I had to put a number down, I'd put down a million and a half," he said, combining the Recreation Vehicle Industry Association's estimate of 1 million full-time RVers with an additional half-million likely snowbirds out of the estimated 9 million RV owners.

Carol White offered another perspective on long-term life and travel in an RV. She and her husband, Phil, spent a year – from June 2000 to June 2001 – traveling across the U.S. in a Class B motor home, a van built on a Dodge chassis. They chronicled their experiences in a just-published book, "Live Your Road Trip Dream: Travel for a year for the cost of staying home."

Carol White, interviewed recently by phone while golfing near her home in Oregon, said she and her husband are not snowbirds, but their lengthy trip taught them lessons applicable to snowbirds.

People considering a snowbird lifestyle, whether they own a 45-foot Class A motor home or a much shorter van, must decide whether they can adjust to more confinement than they have at home.

"That's probably the thing that ends up discouraging the most people. At some point in time, it's not the same as living in a house," she said.

"It's real appealing at first, the idea of being able to move from place to place, but eventually people say, 'I want to put down roots again,'" White said.

Additional resources

Roundup of information on RV snowbirding, posted on the [Wheel Life blog in October 2003](#)

[RV Know How](#), a site maintained by longtime RVers Joe and Vicki Kieva, who also are well-known RV travel writers. They have contributed many articles to RV publications and have authored three books covering the basics of RVing, RVing tips and tricks, and extended RV travel.

