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## RV Snowbirds

by Dennis Gaub, for KOA Kompass

An annual migration has begun: residents of snowy states have left or are getting ready to leave for warmer, sunny locales.

Many of these travelers – snowbirds in popular lingo – steer their motor homes, trailers and campers to southern destinations each fall or early winter. Their most popular stops remain Florida, Arizona, California and Texas.

The Recreation Vehicle Industry Association (RVIA) estimates that about 1.1 million RV owners – 16 percent of all RV owners – escape cold climates each year by joining the annual exodus.

But, unlike retirees in their 60s and 70s who defined the snowbird experience in the past, today's snowbirds have been joined by Baby Boomers in their mid to late 50s who also want to let the snow blower sit idle.

Characteristics of the RV snowbird are changing in other ways as well. Earlier snowbirds typically returned to favorite parks or campgrounds every winter and tended to stay in one place for 3-4 months. Today's snowbirds, however, often take shorter trips to the Sun Belt and move every few weeks as they explore a state or region.

Representatives of two KOA Campgrounds that stay busy in winter agree that the snowbird profile has shifted.

Josh Bell, office manager of the San Diego Metro KOA, described the new snowbirds arriving at the campground his family owns.

"We've transitioned to younger groups: a lot of baby boomers enjoy spending a month away from time to time," he said.

A few years ago, most visitors to Bell's KOA arrived in October and didn't leave until March or April; now, the average stay has shortened to 1-2 months.

And, Bell said, current snowbirds include early retirees for whom San Diego is new territory. "They check out the surrounding area. They want to go beyond the zoo and Sea World," he said.

These visitors venture "off the beaten path" to take in museums and other cultural attractions, as well as restaurants, according to Bell.

Tom McQuade, manager of Lake Whipoorwill KOA in the Orlando area, said: "We're seeing less monthly and more daily people. For sure, the population is definitely younger."

"That may be because I'm getting older," he said, laughing.

"What we're seeing is a lot of first-time RVers that are in their mid- or late 50s, and that's unusual," he said. Explaining, McQuade said snowbirds in the past usually were lifetime RV travelers who first showed up with their families and later came by themselves after retiring.

Several studies done in recent years help profile snowbirds, although a consistent image doesn't emerge from the findings.

A University of Texas-Pan American study of so-called Winter Texans visiting the Rio Grande Valley during the winter of 2000-01 found:

- An estimated 143,000 snowbirds visited the valley during the peak of the winter season (February 2001).
- Snowbirds pumped \$329 million into the valley economy.
- When a multiplier effect was applied, Winter Texans' total economic impact rose to \$465 million; this impact was credited with creating 7,850 jobs.
- Thirty-six percent of the winter visitors volunteered their services to local nonprofit organizations – a drop from the 41-percent volunteer rate found in a similar UTPA study done two years earlier.
- The typical Winter Texan couple lived in an RV or motor home, hailed from the Midwest, stayed 3.6 months in the Rio Grande Valley, completed their ninth trip to the valley and planned to return the next year.

A 1997 study, done by the Texas Department of Economic Development's Tourism Division, profiled Winter Texans. They were defined as all non-Texans taking leisure trips to Texas that started between November 1st and March 31st; travelers had to stay in Texas at least six nights to be included.

Interestingly, this earlier study found that visitors between 25 and 34 made up the largest single age group for Winter Texan trips. However, RVs dominated Winter Texan travel in regions known for long stays by their winter guests, such as the Lower Rio Grande Valley and Odessa-Midland.

Meanwhile, the RVIA recently reported that factory-to-dealer deliveries of recreation vehicles (RVs) in 2003 were forecast to reach the third-highest annual totals in a quarter century as baby boomers continue to drive up sales.

"Helping drive RV sales are the vast baby boomer market and the surging popularity of driving vacations in the United States," said RVIA President David J. Humphreys. "Families want to escape to America's outdoors in these uncertain times, spend quality time together, and avoid hassles associated with flying – all long-term trends likely to sustain continued RV market growth."

Further evidence that the RV travelers – including snowbirds – are getting younger comes from a 2001 University of Michigan study. It found the number of RVs owned by those 35 to 54 grew faster than all other age groups between 1998-2001.

San Diego Metro's Bell, who sits on KOA's technology committee, said he has seen another indicator of a younger snowbird: "A lot of these folks are accustomed to being more connected." Some of today's visitors ask for a wireless Internet connection so they can conveniently check stock portfolios and make reservations online as well as check their email, Bell said. Many KOAs across North America are being connected to the HOTSPOTZZ wireless network, which allows campers to cruise the Internet at broadband speeds from the comfort of their RVs.

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