

Aging Lifestyles: Snowbirds fly from cold conditions

by Joe Volz and Kate Bird

Every year, along with the geese and robins, thousands of snowbirds migrate to southern climates as winter sets in.

Our friend Bob, an avid golfer, is one of them.

"I'm out on the golf course every day. I love the sun and the warmth and I hate the cold back home."

He figures he's got the ideal life: he lives in Frederick, Md., nine months of the year and in Boca Raton, Fla., the other three.

We wonder, though, if he and the other snowbirds appreciate the game Mother Nature is playing with them in this year of cockeyed weather.

The map of the United States in the newspapers, as we write this, is painted blue from shore-to-shore and border- to-border.

Maybe it's not so bad to stay in Frederick this winter. We've had no snow and many days in the 50s and 60s. Some spring flowers are starting to bloom.

Anybody who is thinking about becoming a snowbird might want to look at a new study conducted by the University of Florida. It provides a portrait of the snowbird as well as a report on "sunbirds." A sunbird is an older person who leaves Florida during the hot months.

The Florida study reports that there are far more snowbirds than sunbirds: 818,000 snowbirds traveled from their home states, Canada or abroad to spend at least a month in Florida in the winter. In contrast, only 313,000 sunbirds left their residences for at least 30 consecutive days in the warm weather.

Our friend Don is a sunbird. After being raised in New Jersey, he moved permanently to Fort Lauderdale, Fla., so he could play golf year-round. Since he can no longer play in Florida's high temperatures and humidity, he does just the opposite of the snowbird; he leaves Florida every year in April or May and goes to Milwaukee, Wis., to play on a public course. He and his wife don't return until the cooler weather starts.

Snowbirds also migrate to other states; however, it is in fewer numbers and not always in search of high temperatures. Along with Arizona and south Texas, they also head to Michigan, North Carolina and Colorado.

Snowbirds almost universally travel south for the fine weather and recreational opportunities, but the sunbirds aren't as weather conscious, the study said. Only 10 percent leave because of the heat, while more than half leave to visit family and friends or to visit a state where they used to live.

Many transplanted snowbirds find themselves lured back now and again to their longtime home. Often it's to visit relatives and friends; however, some go back out of nostalgia or to see how things have changed since they moved away.

While 75 percent of snowbirds are married, only 59 percent of sunbirds are. Both groups are overwhelmingly white and retired. While 63 percent of the snowbirds rate their health as "very good" or "excellent," only 55 percent of the sunbirds did.

Another characteristic of snowbirds and sunbirds is that they are financially comfortable. It's a good thing, especially since prices in Florida have been going up. Also, with the threat of hurricanes, homeowners are buying expensive insurance to cover storm damages.

The study also reveals that snowbirds seem to follow a set pattern: They rent a condo or house for a few years before making the decision to buy a second home in Florida.

That's just what Bob did. He and his wife spent a month or two in Florida for several years before deciding that they liked their lifestyle in the sunny state. They now own a condo in Boca Raton.

There are some downsides to being a snowbird in Florida. High among them are the congested streets and the crowded restaurants. Often, the snowbirds visit the amusement parks proliferating in the state with their grandkids as well. The lines are always long.

As a result, some people who are turned off by the hullabaloo only visit Florida after the high winter season ends. This is when life returns to a more normal rhythm.

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