

BUSINESS

Snowbird tourism expected to bounce back in Pensacola area after COVID-hampered 2021**Alex Miller**

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Tourism officials in Escambia and Santa Rosa counties are counting on a return to pre-pandemic levels for its annual snowbird season.

More mobility between Canada and the United States already this winter is a positive sign that seasonal visitors to Northwest Florida will return.

“Well, it really helps keep our down season stay alive. (It keeps) our winter season alive,” said Santa Rosa County Tourist Development Director Julie White. “They are the ones who help our winter season if you think about it because the vacationers aren't coming here in the winter.”

Snowbirds are people who typically come to warmer places during winter months to avoid the colder places they live in most of the year. White said the snowbirds in this region are typically 55 years old and above.

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Lori Raisch, the executive assistant at Perdido Key Area Chamber of Commerce, said one of the only differences between this year and pre-pandemic years is snowbirds are following national health recommendations when gathering.

“We’re seeing people follow the CDC guidelines and mask and do all those things,” Raisch said. “But they're coming, they're just using appropriate precautions.”

White said most of the snowbird community in Northwest Florida comes from the Midwest and even parts of Canada.

“Normally, pre-pandemic we had a growing number of snowbirds coming to Navarre Beach and in general, Northwest Florida. And then the pandemic, obviously, put everything to a halt. Not completely, but a lot,” White said, adding that less restrictive travel guidelines between Canada and the U.S. this winter as compared to last year should have an impact on snowbird tourism.

New wave of snowbirds?

Santa Rosa Island Authority Director of Administration Robbie Schrock said the pandemic could even bring a new wave of snowbirds now that more people are conducting their jobs remotely.

“I wouldn't always say that it's necessarily older people, if you will. But what it is, as you know, a lot of people are working remotely now. And so, we have the (possibility that) maybe one of the two (in a couple) is retired and the other one's still able to come and work remotely,” Schrock said. “And they just want a different change of pace and a different view and a different setting for a month or two.”

Snowbird tourism was down about 30% or 40% last year, White said. Schrock said the SRIA canceled its lone snowbird event in 2021.

The loss to the economy in such a year is significant in that snowbirds do a good job of stimulating commerce in the winter months they are here, tourism officials said.

“I mean, that's the funny thing to me. It has been since I moved here. If you go to a restaurant over here this time of year and just look at the license plates, (you ask yourself) 'Wow, is there anybody left up north?’” White said with a laugh.

It's not just dining and shopping revenue that is impacted as snowbirds tend to interact with the area differently than the summer or spring tourists.

“I think that you see them all doing a lot more of the arts and culture and the entertainments and the museums,” Schrock said.

Snowbirds have built nest of friends

Other than the warmer weather as a draw, people tend to return to Northwest Florida because of the community they have built over the years, White said. Their winter months are another opportunity to experience a community they do not get to interact with that often.

“They have a network, social network. They have limited friends here and they come back year after year and meet up with their friends and do things,” White said. “So, they help our restaurants out, they dine in our restaurants, they help out our direct economy by shopping at Publix and they boost our economy for the winter here.”

Schrock said snowbirds have created their own insular groups when they are here, creating bonds similar to sports fans.

“One really interesting thing I heard is that, let's say you're from Minnesota, or whatnot. So, if you're from that state, they have a meet-up once a week, or whatever that may be, and they meet up and everyone from that state knows where to go and how to mingle,” Schrock said.

Local organizations have an assortment of events and activities they market to the snowbird community. Schrock said many of the businesses on Pensacola Beach will offer unique events for snowbirds. Activities are also organized throughout the month of January at the Navarre Beach Visitor Information Center, and the Perdido Key Area Chamber of Commerce hosts western-themed events for snowbirds at the Flora-Bama.