

Snowbirds—An Endangered Species?

By: Nathan Crace Date: June 28, 2006

I had an interesting question posed to me a few days ago by someone I have known for years who has been in the golf business longer than I have been alive.

“Do you think there will be a Snowbird season this winter?” he asked.

I asked him why he would ask such a question and his reply was that his concern was based not so much on the fact that there weren't golf courses on the Mississippi Gulf Coast to play (most have been open for months now with the exception of a few that have closed for major renovations after Hurricane Katrina), but rather that the infrastructure and hotels were in disarray.

“What if they go to Myrtle Beach instead and decide they like it better?” he surmised.

The easy answer is that Myrtle Beach does not have casino gaming and that is a big draw for Snowbirds traveling to the Mississippi Gulf Coast. They do have more courses to choose from, but Mississippi is also more laid back.

Of course, when you drive down US Highway 90 through Gulfport and Biloxi, you cannot escape the total destruction south of the railroad tracks on the Gulf Coast. And I have not yet been west of Gulfport to “Ground Zero” in Bay St. Louis. And if you want to get a quick bite for lunch, you need to arrive at 10:55 a. m. and be at the door of your favorite restaurant when they open for lunch to get in front of the contractors who are rebuilding the Coast.

I was also in New Orleans a few weeks ago to see the three-story home of a good friend of mine who lived in the Lakeview area of New Orleans just south of Lake Pontchartrain. The bottom two floors were destroyed after having been flooded for weeks. The top floor looked as though nothing ever happened. In fact, if you were dropped into his house on the top floor, there would be no reason to believe anything was wrong until you walked downstairs. As I looked up and down the street from his front yard, his street (and the others throughout the neighborhood) was noticeably vacant like a ghost town and the water lines on the homes told the understated story of the water level that settled after the initial flooding—higher than the lines indicated on the outside of the homes. And the drive into New Orleans from Slidell through New Orleans East was reminiscent of the after effects of a war zone with nothing open except a Home Depot.

The destruction in New Orleans was a different type of destruction. Still devastating in its totality, yet eerily different than the full-blown magnitude of the Mississippi Gulf Coast. Those in the Crescent City point to Biloxi and say “At least their debris is gone and they can start rebuilding now” while those in Mississippi point westward and say “Their possessions may be ruined, but at least they can find them and the house is still there.” Who's right? Both. And neither.

Beyond the obvious impact on the normality of life and the families torn apart by the storm, businesses are coming back and almost a year after Katrina made landfall things get a little better every day. So what will the impact be this coming winter on the lucrative Snowbird season on the Mississippi Gulf Coast and in New Orleans? Could there be a possibility that Snowbirds may now be an endangered species?

The 2005-06 Snowbird season was virtually non-existent for most courses in that region and the upcoming 2006-07 season looks to be brighter. Of course, the way developers are rushing into the region to buy up land and start new golf course developments, the 2007-08 season has the potential to be incredibly successful.

So are Snowbirds endangered? I don't think so. Are they less in number? Probably so this year, though much better compared to last year. I have a generally optimistic view of the future for the Gulf Coast region and the future may actually bring bigger and better things than ever before. As difficult as it may be to see right now, the long-term effects of the Hurricane may actually be a positive for everything from new jobs to new industries to awareness of local politics and the impact they have on levee safety. The Coastal areas will return to full strength and the Snowbirds will return. And in 25 years, we may look back to August 29, 2005 as the turning point for the growth of a vibrant Gulf Coast. Let's just hope that it's at least another 25 years from now before the next “big one” hits.

Nathan Crace is a golf course architect and member of the Golf Writers Assoc. of America whose freelance “Lipouts” column is based, at times, on topics submitted to the author by readers like you. If you have a topic you would like to see discussed or wish to read past columns from his archives, log on to www.lipouts.com and let him know. Copyright 2006.