

# POST-RETIREMENT PASSION

Fred and Suzi Dow stay busy updating their guide to campgrounds in U.S. national forests and grasslands.



Some people battle boredom in retirement. Worse yet, they feel their lives no longer have value. Fred and Suzi Dow, F435606, have never had such problems.

"I've always said, 'You retire from work, not from what you love,'" Suzi said. "We discovered national forests kind of late in life, and grasslands even later, and we've loved them ever since."

Loved them enough that the Dows created the U.S. National Forest Campground Guide ([www.forestcamping.com](http://www.forestcamping.com)) and have devoted the past 22 years to researching, publishing, and updating the quintessential source of online information for 2,400 developed campgrounds in national forests and grasslands. Along the way, the couple published a dozen e-books and started a Facebook page that now has 20,000 followers.

Last year, [forestcamping.com](http://forestcamping.com) drew 1.2 million unique visitors. This year, as of the end of July, the site averaged 9 million hits per month. All this keeps the Dows busy. Suzi, 69, is up at 5:00 a.m. each day answering some of the 100 or more emails the couple receives each week. Fred, 82, often works on the website or e-books until after midnight.

"I've been thinking about getting a job so I can get some time off," Suzi said. She's joking. The project has been a labor of love.

It began in 1994, when they lived in Virginia and Fred was nearing retirement from the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, where he was a supervisory system analyst. The couple had plans to attend a festival in western Virginia, but with lodging scarce, a friend suggested they pitch a tent in Jefferson National Forest. Suzi, who was pursuing a master's degree in communications at George Mason University, searched Library of Congress holdings and could find no recreation information for that national forest, or any other.

They learned two things that weekend. "One is, the ground gets very hard the older you get," Suzi said. Second, there was a lack of information about national forest campgrounds.

U.S. Forest Service officials gave their blessing to the Dows' project, with the understanding that information on the website would remain free to the public. Fred and Suzi are not Forest Service employees and receive no salary; they earn some income from ads on their website and sales of their e-books, which include maps not available on the website.

In fact, the project's primary purpose has never been about making a living. "Our mission is to get people into the national forests," Suzi said. "We want people to discover what a great, great heritage they have in the forests. If people don't use and appreciate them, they'll go away."

At first, the Dows didn't realize how big a project they were taking on. Upon learning that there are about 5,000 developed campgrounds in national forests, they whittled that number in half by focusing on campgrounds with 10 or more designated campsites.

From the outset, their goal was to visit each campground and collect information that people could use to make informed decisions about where to camp, such as directions, rates, RV information (including number and type of hookups; parking apron size; dump stations); and bath and shower facilities. They also

gathered facts about water sports, hiking, and fishing. In all, they collect more than 50 pieces of data for each campground.

"I told Suzi we could (visit) 10 campgrounds a day. That was pretty naïve," Fred admitted. East of the Mississippi River, they did well to make stops at five to seven campgrounds a day; in the West, where campgrounds are farther apart, they might get to two to five.

They spent the first three years full-timing in a 23-foot travel trailer, before moving up to a 27-footer, "which Fred likes to say saved our marriage," Suzi quipped, noting that the extra four feet made a big difference.

They continued full-timing until 1998, when they rolled into Bisbee, Arizona. "We were only going to stay two days, and we left two weeks later with a (house) mortgage," Suzi said. That's when they cut back to about six months of travel a year; now, they're on the road about three to four months.

In 2004, they bought a Type C motorhome, a Winnebago Itasca Spirit, which they still own and use. It has been outfitted with solar panels to accommodate frequent dry camping. "We look forward to leaving (Bisbee)," Fred said, "and we look

forward to coming home."

At the suggestion of a U.S. Forest Service employee, the Dows expanded their campground guide to include sites within national grasslands. "If you've never seen a grassland, it's an experience," Suzi said. "You really should treat yourself."

In 2012, they completed their research on campgrounds within all 155 national forests and all 20 national grasslands. Time to call it quits, right?

"Oddly enough, no," Suzi said. "That's when we said we ought to go back and revisit the campgrounds we've discovered."

Makes sense, given that their demanding schedule usually didn't allow them to linger long in favorite spots. And by backtracking, they're able to update descriptions and photos (some 12,000 are posted on the website) and shoot video. Public feedback also helps keep campground descriptions up-to-date.

Retirement could get even busier for the Dows. During their travels, they discovered 1,700-mile U.S. Highway 191, a two-lane route that runs from Douglas, Arizona, on the Mexican border to the Canadian border, north of Loring, Montana. The couple plans to publish a travel guide that emphasizes points of

**Fred and Suzi Dow's retirement** project has taken them to 2,400 developed campgrounds in U.S. national forests and grasslands, and at each location they collect more than 50 pieces of information. Their stops have included Stanislaus National Forest in the Sierra Nevada of California (left), and Sheyenne National Grassland in southeast North Dakota (below).



PHOTOS COURTESY OF FRED & SUZI DOW

interest along the route.

They enjoy hearing from people who have benefited from their work. One of Suzi's favorite emails came from a young woman who has a disability and had never been camping. After the Dows provided recommendations, the woman said she would pack up her five dogs and go, by herself. "A couple of weeks later, we got an email from her, thanking us profusely for providing her with the courage to have that experience."

Not everyone needs courage to begin exploring America's national forests and grasslands. Some people just want to know what awaits them at a particular campground. That information is readily available, thanks to Fred and Suzi Dow. **FMC**