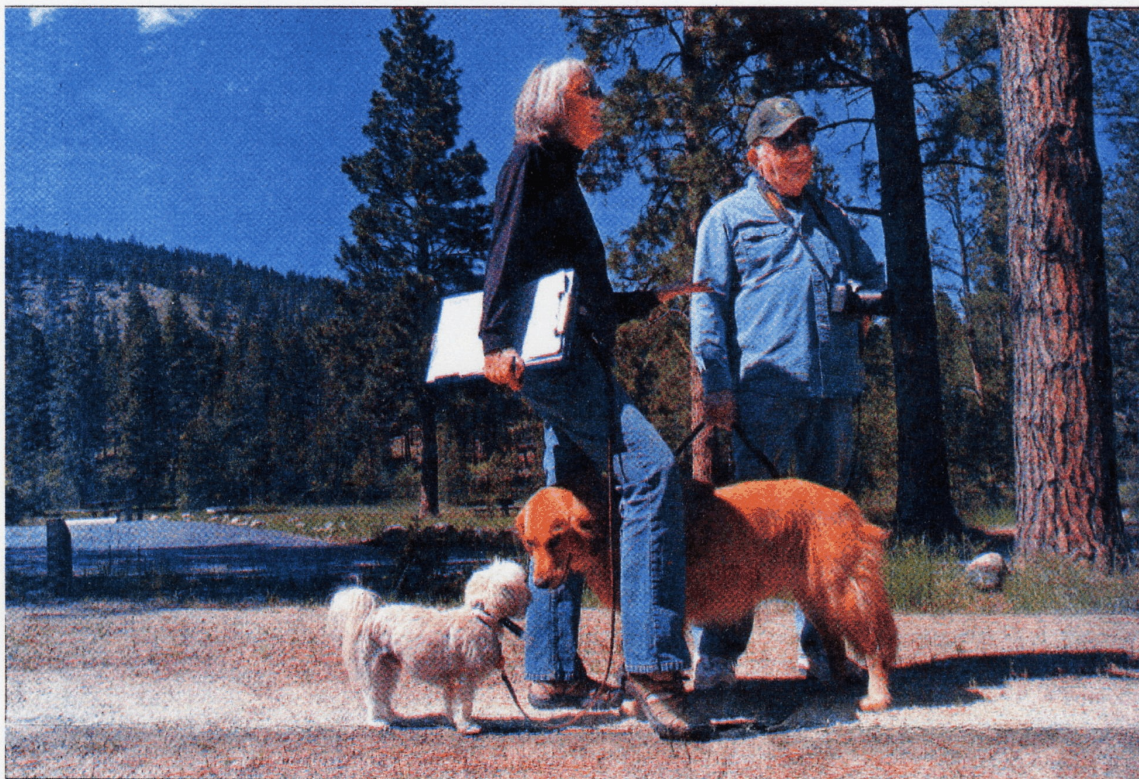


CAMPING COUPLE



MICHAEL GALLACHER/MISSOULIAN

Suzi and Fred Dow, with their dogs Ralf, left, and Dani in tow, have been touring national forest campgrounds across America for 10 years, compiling information on everything from the size of the campsite to the type of toilet that awaits you.

Working at play

Fred and Suzi Dow check out national forest campgrounds so the rest of us know what we're heading into

By PERRY BACKUS
of the Missoulian

FLORENCE – When Fred Dow met his soon-to-be wife Suzi, he made a declaration.

"I don't do windows and I don't camp."
Funny how things change.

After catching the camping bug in the mid-1990s and then getting downright frustrated about the lack of information on national forest campgrounds, the Dows have traveled more than 156,000 miles and visited 2,038 campgrounds in their quest to get people out of the house and into the woods.

On Wednesday, they were patrolling the Dr. Charles Waters Memorial Campground up Bass Creek Road near Florence on the Bitterroot National Forest.

Clipboard in hand and tape measure in pocket, the two followed their pooches along the winding campground road while eyeballing every turn-in and

Sharing the knowledge

To dip into the wealth of information on thousands of campgrounds, go to www.forestcamping.com.

pull-thru, noting the type of trees growing overhead and checking out the SSTs (that's sweet-smelling toilets for you amateurs).

When they finish making a very complete inspection Thursday, the Dows will enter the 55 fields of data they've gathered on this and other nearby campgrounds into the database that will eventually end up on their Web site, www.forestcamping.com.

Suzi's the writer and Fred is the technical wiz. "We complement each other," Suzi said. "Both of us together make one good person."

A visitor to the Web site – it gets up to 140,000 hits a day – will find everything from a general description of the campground and nearby recreational

opportunities to the nearest waste station and the cost to spend a night.

"We've tried to put together information people can use," Suzi said.

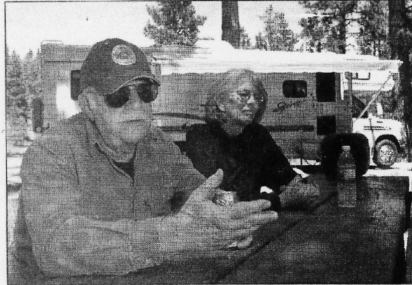
For the last decade, the couple has been spending six months on the road carefully checking out national forest campsites all over the country. After a stint in Montana this spring, they plan to spend the rest of the season exploring campgrounds in Oregon.

Once they've completed that journey, they'll only have to pick off Washington state and Alaska to wrap up their mission to visit all of the 3,000 or so national forest campgrounds accessible by a family sedan.

And then they'll start all over again. "There are 157 national forests," Fred said. "We've done 138. I'm not sure anyone has done as much."

While it may be fun to camp out and enjoy nature, the Dows have a higher calling. As far as they're

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MICHAEL GALLACHER/Missoulian

The Dows' Web site, www.forestcamping.com, gets about 140,000 visitors a day taking advantage of their hard work.

Play

Continued

concerned, this country's national forest campground system is endangered.

"We want to try to get more people into the forest," Fred said. "We think it's important that people get out and see their heritage. Campers can be the lobby for the Forest Service. They need all the help they can get."

In their travels over the last decade, the couple has seen the impact of budget cuts on national forest campgrounds.

"Maybe if more people get out and see what this country has to offer, more will complain about the levels of funding that Congress sets for the Forest Service," Fred said. "It's despicable."

Because of funding cuts, Suzi said, the agency is considering closing many developed campgrounds across the country.

"A lot of those campgrounds are places where people have been going for years and years," she said. "We've met people who have been coming back to the same campground for 60 or more years. They tell us their grandparents brought them there and now they're bringing their grandkids."

It's an important resource and one that people need to care about," she said.

Many national forest campgrounds are now being run by concessionaires as part of a move by the Forest Service to outsource jobs. The Dows have seen what happens when the agency steps away.

"The costs go up almost every time," Fred said. "This one here costs \$10 a night - it's el cheapo.

If it was run by a concessionaire, it would probably cost somewhere between \$16 to \$18 a night."

"Listen to that babbling brook over there," he said. "What more can you ask for? This place is beautiful."

Forest camping is still an affordable way to vacation.

"Why would you want to go to a motel?" Fred said. "I don't want to sleep in somebody else's bed."

"The last time I stayed in a motel, it cost \$17 at the Holiday Inn," Suzi chimed in.

Besides, you miss all the interesting characters when you camp in the motel.

"We've met our share of interesting people," Suzi said.

There was the retired telephone company camp host who was sure that if she didn't get out in the woods and set up her batch of hummingbird feeders, the birds just wouldn't survive.

Or the married couple and their color-coded chipmunks.

"We noticed that this one campground had more than its share of chipmunks. And then we noted the chipmunks had their toenails painted. She'd color-coded them," Fred said.

And then there was the father pushing his son in a wheelchair. The two were coming down a handicap-accessible trail that ended at a waterfall.

"The guy was just in tears," remembers Fred. "His son was so happy. He'd never seen a waterfall. That's the kind of thing that the forest has to offer to people if they just take the time and get out into it."

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