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Camping in the cold

BY JULIET PENNINGTON FOR THE SUN CHRONICLE

FOXBORO - After a long week at work, many people like to hunker down and hibernate in their homes for the weekend during the cold winter months. Even those who like nothing more than the great outdoors save their getting-away-from-it-all yearnings for the warm summer months.

Not Janine and Bob Eaton of Whitman. They are among a growing number of people who enjoy winter camping almost as much as more traditional summer camping.

"When you have such a hectic life all week, it's nice to get away and meet up with friends," said Janine, 58, a social worker who was enjoying a recent weekend at Normandy Farms campground with her husband. "There are about 12 of us who meet here regularly."

In addition to playing cards, the Eatons and their friends enjoy sitting around a wood-burning barrel stove and drinking hot apple cider, roasting marshmallows, and looking up at the clear night sky where, she says, "the stars are brighter than you can even imagine."

The Eatons purchased a "Winter Wonderland" package at Normandy Farms, where for \$845, they have a permanent site on which they can leave their camper between Nov. 1 and March 31 and use it on weekends, holidays and school vacations.

They also have use of the skating pond, indoor pool and sauna, a fitness center and 20,000-square-foot recreation lodge where there is an arcade and daily activities ranging from movies to arts and crafts to bingo and card tournaments.

Sometimes, Eaton said, she and her husband just like to spend time in their "home away from home," watching movies on their large flat-screen TV, or reading.

"There's plenty to do and we never get bored," she said. "We've been camping for 18 years and this is the first time we tried the Winter Wonderland. We love it so much that we're already booked for next year."

Even though water to individual sites is not hooked up during winter months, Eaton said the communal washrooms at the campground are "spotless," so she has no problem using them.

"Winter or summer, we enjoy the RV (recreational vehicle) lifestyle," said Bob Eaton, 59, a heating and air conditioning service technician. "I just attach it (the trailer) to my truck and go."

John "JD" McKenna, 42, a state employee from New Bedford, said he likes to "get away for the weekend and socialize with friends."



Bob Eaton, of Whitman, closes the door of his wood stove that he fashioned from a barrel as his wife, Janine, looks on while winter camping recently at Normandy Farms in Foxboro. (Staff photo by Martin Gavin)

On a recent Saturday, McKenna was building a fire and fastening a large tarp from his trailer to a nearby tree to help block the wind in what would later that night be the gathering area for he and his wife, Margaret, and their friends.

"I love the outdoors and it's really fun to share it with friends around the fire," he said. "And if it's too cold, we can always go inside."

Inside McKenna's trailer is a TV set with a DVD player and Wii console, complete with games and accessories. The couches are adorned with Patriots and Red Sox blankets.

"I'm a (Patriots) season ticket holder, so it's convenient being here on game days," he said. "My wife drops me off over on Route 1, where I meet up with friends to go to the game. It's also great being so close for concerts at the stadium."

McKenna said another "major plus" at Normandy Farms campground is its year-old dog park, complete with a doggie fountain and washing station and pooch-friendly agility equipment.

"It's great for Gretchen," he said with a proud smile, referring to his 5-year-old miniature Schnauzer.

Marcia Daniels Galvin, human resources director at Normandy Farms Campground and president of the Massachusetts Association of Campground Owners, said campers seem to be pleased with the new dog park.

She said the family-owned campground, which opened in the early 1970s, tries to add one new amenity each year to stay competitive in the RV and camping industry - and in the travel industry as a whole.

This year they added a third "yurt," a round, tent-like structure that comes with air conditioning, a stove, cable-ready TV and sleeps up to six.

The yurts are a plus for those who like what has recently been penned as "glamping" - that is, "glamorous camping" with modern amenities and without the roughing it component.

"We try to keep up with what the guests are looking for," she said. "We put out a survey and ask them what they want."

While summertime camping is more popular than its winter counterpart, Galvin said she is seeing an increase in winter camping.

She said people like to enjoy the beauty of all that New England winters have to offer, and families try to find ways to carve out time together away from the stresses of their daily lives.

"There's also a different camaraderie with the winter campers. They're a very tight-knit group," she said. "They come weekend after weekend and form a special bond. They cook breakfasts together, dinners together. In the summer, we have a more transient population."

On any given weekend in the winter, a few dozen campers will take up residence at Normandy Farms. In the summer, the 450 campsites are sold out on the weekends.

Logan Villandry, 8, a second grader at Community School in North Attleboro, said he likes camping at Normandy Farms in the summertime better than in the winter because he can "go fishing and run around the pond and under the bridge," but on a recent Saturday, he was all too happy to be playing "candy bar bingo."

He proudly held up the Snickers bar he won, as well as a purple teddy bear he snared in the "claw" machine in the recreation center's arcade.

"It's fun here anytime," he said. "It's my favorite place."