

**FREE!**

# Snow **BIRDS**

Gulf Coast

A Winter Visitor  
Publication  
January 2025

**Clubs and  
Calendar**  
pages 10-11 and 12-13

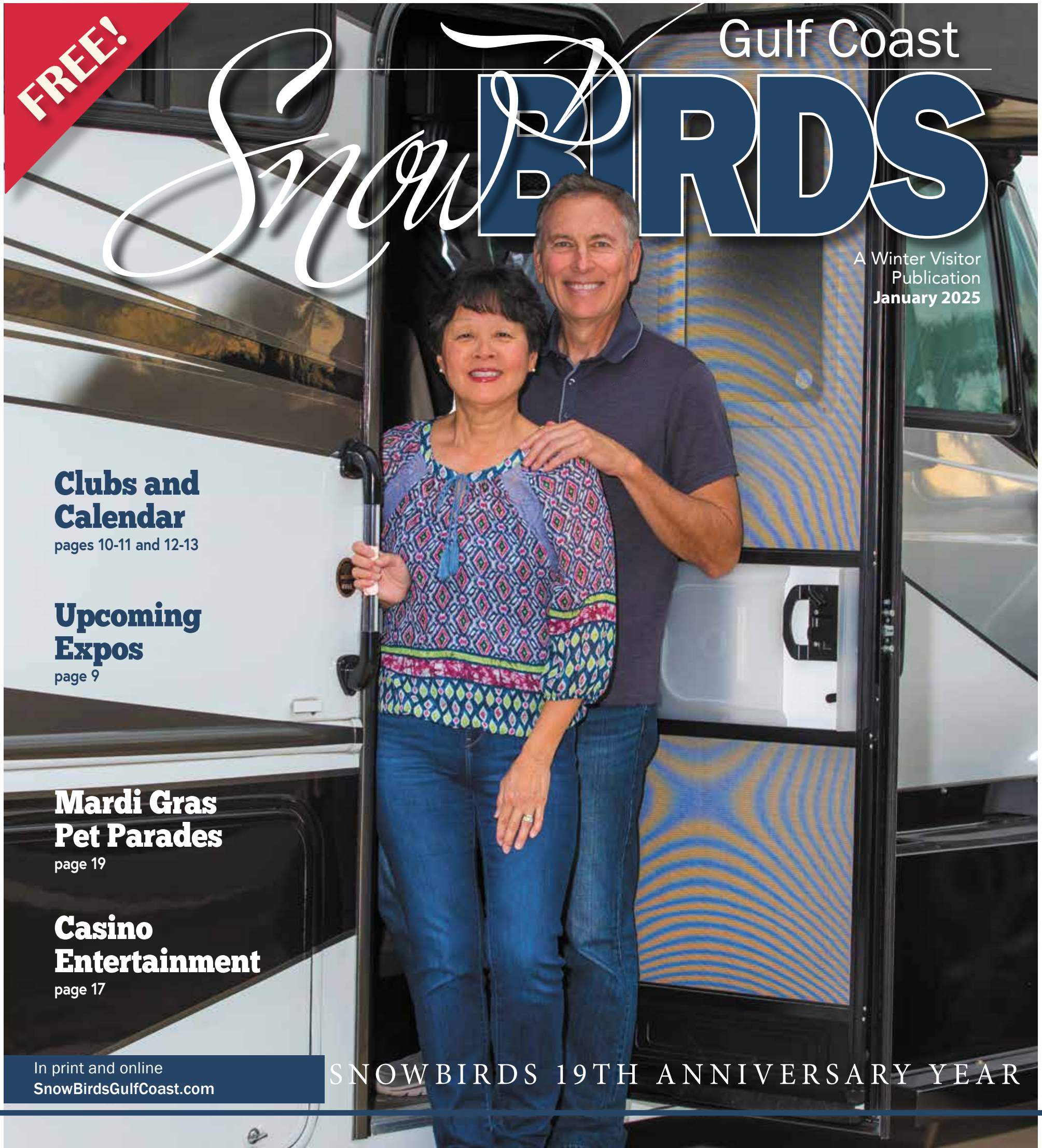
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# Gulf Coast Snow BIRDS

## ON THE COVER

Wisconsin natives Greg and Shari Riehle have been married for nearly 40 years. They have been snowbirds since retiring in 2018, and are now spending their fifth year in Gulf Shores, Ala., where they've built a community of friends thanks to the Wisconsin Snobird Club.

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**Reserve ad space by Jan. 16, art due Jan . 20**

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NEW YEAR'S EVE PARTY STARTS AT 9 P.M.  
FIREWORKS AT MIDNIGHT

**NEW YEAR'S DAY**  
Pier Plunge starts at noon.  
Party after with Six Piece  
Suits and drink specials.

## WINTER HOURS

BREAKFAST SAT. & SUN.

7:30-11 AM

LUNCH STARTS AT NOON

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# Welcome!

Congratulations!

If you are reading this in our print edition it means you made it to the coast for however long you can stay.

Now, what are your plans?

If this is your first season, I suggest you get involved with a Snowbird club, volunteer organization, recreation activity, through church activities or whatever interest you have.

Very shortly you will find more things to do than you have time. And, many activities are discounted (if you are a senior) and restaurants have deals, too.

You don't even have to order the kids meal!

Our cover couple met special friends at the Wisconsin "Snobird" Club meeting and often socialize outside official club activities. Many folks over the years have shared that they haven't made significant new friends in years. They still value their old friends at home but are appreciative of their new ones, too.

The Wisconsin club has deep roots and current president Kenn Krouse and his lovely wife, Lora have been energizer bunnies for more than two decades (they were able to retire early). They gathered volunteers for a multitude of fundraisers for Alabama libraries, fire departments and the local zoo following a devastating hurricane.

Y'all volunteer where you can! Set boundaries but realize that many organizations need what you have to offer.

This month we welcome back two big Snowbird events - the Visit Mobile Day and the Snowbird Fest. Several others include the Navarre Snowbird Welcome and Pensacola Beach Bash. Panama City has several years-long events and the popular Perdido Key "Hootenannies" return at the world-famous Honky Tonk, Flora-Bama.

So, no excuses - gas up your vehicle and load up your friends. If the event is busy "divide and conquer" to cover as much ground as possible.

I always end with "we are always glad you are here."

Thank you for your support.

Karen Harrell

Publisher@SnowbirdsGulfCoast.com

850-291-1266

Find us on Facebook: Snowbirds Gulf Coast Magazine



Be sure to stop by the Alabama Welcome Centers (East and West) to learn more about all there is to do in the state.

# UPCOMING COMMUNITY EVENTS

## Navarre New Year's Eve Celebration

Dec. 31 | 8:30 pm - 12:30 am

Navarre Beach Pier, 8579 Gulf Blvd.

## Penguin Plunge N' Paddle

Wed., Jan. 1, 2025 | 12:30 pm - 2 pm

Jauna's Pagodas, 1451 Navarre Beach Cswy.

## Navarre Beach Pier Plunge

Wed., Jan. 1, 2025 | 12 pm

Navarre Beach Pier, 8579 Gulf Blvd.

## 2025 Snowbirds Festival:

### The Roaring 20s

Jan. 16 | 2 pm - 4 pm

6464 Gulf Breeze Pkwy.

## 2025 Navarre Beach

### Mardi Gras Parade

Feb. 22 | 1 pm - 3 pm

Gulf Blvd.

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— Navarre's —  
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Anniversary  
(1925-2025)

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and  
Navarre Beach Area  
Chamber of Commerce*

**FOR A ROARING 20'S THEMED SNOWBIRDS FESTIVAL  
FEATURING AREA BUSINESSES, MUSIC, DANCING, LIGHT BITES & FUN FOR ALL!**

**THURSDAY, JANUARY 16, 2025 | 2 PM TO 4 PM**

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# Wisconsin Snowbirds build community in Gulf Shores

Q. What are your names, ages, how long have you been married?

Our names are Greg and Shari Riehle. We'll be married 40 years in May, 2025.



Q. How did you meet? Where did you grow up? Where did you live in Wisconsin?

We met while working at the same public utility in Milwaukee, WI. Shari grew up on the south side of Milwaukee, and I grew up in Menomonee Falls, WI. We bought our first home in Colgate, WI and moved several times within Washington and Waukesha Counties. We now live in Arbor Vitae, WI (the "Northwoods").

Q. Do you have children? Ages and where do they live? Any grands?

We don't have any children, but we enjoy

our nieces and nephews!

Q. Are you working or retired? What kind of work did you do?

Shari was a corporate governance specialist, and after leaving the company, I began my second career in residential construction. I retired in February 2018 and Shari retired in March 2018.

Q. How many years have you been snowbirds? How did you discover Gulf Shores?

We've been snowbirds since our retirement. We knew of the Gulf coast but had never visited. Our former neighbors in Arbor Vitae had spent several winters in the area and told us how much they loved it, so a few years ago we decided our winter trip would be Gulf Shores! This is our fifth year here

Q. Where do you stay? How did you discover the location?

We're staying at Tropic Hideaway RV Resort near OWA. It's a lovely RV park with lots of space.

We've visited many of the RV parks in this area, which is how we found this one which fits us perfectly.

Q. Did you previously Snowbird elsewhere?

Yes, our first Snowbird adventure was to Corpus Christi, TX, where we stayed for several months.



What things do you enjoy doing on the Gulf Coast?

We enjoy our Wisconsin Snowbird Club activities, going to local events in the beach area, Foley, and beyond, walking the trails at Gulf State Park, and eating at all the delicious restaurants in the area!

Q. Have you influenced others to winter here?

While we've had family and friends visit us, so far we haven't influenced anyone to winter here - yet! They're always sorry to leave, though, so there's still hope!

Q. Have you made friends during your stay?

Yes, we've definitely made friends here, which is such a big part of us returning to Gulf Shores every year. The Wisconsin Snowbird Club has been instrumental in our meeting new people and making such great friends.

*Left and above: The Riehles with friends Mike and Debi Quirk*

## Get to Know OWA

OWA Parks & Resort is a dining, entertainment and resort destination in Foley, Ala., just minutes from Alabama beaches. Downtown OWA, open seven days a week, features numerous restaurants, unique shopping and the OWA Theater. It is adjacent to hotels and a luxury RV park onsite. OWA's Tropic Falls features 23 theme-park rides, outdoor wave pool and indoor water park. Find OWA at 101 OWA Blvd., Foley, Ala. For more information about shopping, dining, discounts and special events, visit <https://visitowa.com/>

## Entertainment at OWA

### OWA Theater

#### Bee Gees Now: The Premier Bee Gees Tribute

Jan. 4 and 5

Celebrates the iconic music and timeless charisma of the legendary Bee Gees. From the soulful hits like How Deep Is Your Love to the dance floor anthems like Stayin' Alive and Night Fever, this tribute will transport you back to the golden age of the 70's.

### Chi-Town Transit

#### Authority:

#### A Tribute to the Music of Chicago

Jan. 18 at 7:30 p.m.

Feel the magic of Chicago's greatest hits with powerful brass sections, rich harmonies, and all the energy that made the band a classic.



### OWA Theater's \$10 Matinee Movies

Jan. 3 and 10, Feb. 6 and 13

Starting Jan. 3, groove into the new year with Saturday Night Fever (1977 | R). Don't miss the comedy hit Some Like It Hot (1959), on Jan. 10. Celebrate The Beatles on Feb. 6 with Help! (1965 | G). On Feb. 13, enjoy the charm of Elvis Presley in Girls! Girls! Girls! (1962 | PG).

For more information or to purchase tickets, visit <https://visitowa.com/entertainment/owa-theater/> or call the OWA Theater Box Office at 251-369-6100.





# Snowbird welcome events preview: From Mobile to Apalachicola

Now that you are here and dipped your toes in the sand, it's time to explore.

## Meet Mobile Day Snowbird Expo

Jan. 7, 1 to 4 p.m. at Eric H. Meyer Civic Center, 1930 West 2nd St., Gulf Shores, Ala. The city where Mardi Gras originated (in the U.S.) has so much going for it. Seasonal cruising, Amtrak restarting service soon and a new airport nearby are just a few recent additions. Mardi Gras parades will start rolling soon! The Visit Mobile team and a variety of vendors representing attractions, dining, shopping, recreational facilities and more will be on hand with information and goodies. Details: 251-208-7304 or mobile.org

## Navarre Beach Snowbirds Festival

This third annual festival is a chance to celebrate Navarre Beach's history and mingle with the community. The 2025 festival is on Jan. 16 from 2 to 4 p.m. at St. Sylvester Catholic Church. The theme is the Roaring 20s, and attendees are encouraged (but not required) to dress in 1920s attire. Vendors include local restaurants, shops, boutiques and more. Details: Navarrechamber.com



The USS Alabama is one of Mobile's most popular attractions.

## Snowbird Fest

Organized and produced by The Snowbird Company, Snowbird Fest is Feb. 4 from 9 a.m. to 1 p.m. at the Orange Beach Event Center at The Wharf. Connect with vendors from all forms of business, including restaurants, insurance companies and attractions such as golf, vacation rentals, fishing and entertainment. Both the young and old Elvises have made appearances that had snowbirds' toes tapping, while other entertainers have performed an eclectic mix of beach tunes, country and rock. The event also boasts a car "shine and show." Details: www.snowbirdfest.com

## 10th Annual Pensacola Beach Chamber/SRIA Beach Bash

Join the bash on the beach on Jan. 23 from 9 to 11 a.m. at Our Lady of Assumption Catholic Church for a variety of vendors and entertainment. A light breakfast will be served. Be sure to take the opportunity to drive through the Gulf Islands National Seashore

and visit historic Fort Pickens. Details: 850-932-1500 or www.visitpensacolabeach.com

## Visit Panama City Beach: Winter Resident Appreciation Days

Winter residents can enjoy complimentary coffee, donuts and giveaways at Winter Resident Appreciation Days from 8 to 10:30 a.m. at Boardwalk Beach Hotel & Convention Center. Dates include Jan. 10, Feb. 7 and Feb. 18. Homecoming Dance and Social: Jan. 13, 4 to 9 p.m. - This year's Homecoming Dance and Social is at Boardwalk Beach Hotel & Convention Center. Winter Resident Senior Prom -

Feb. 10, 10 a.m. - One of the biggest winter resident events of the year! The theme is Paradise Island, and the event is staged at Edgewater Beach and Golf Resort. **Winter Resident Grand Finale** - Feb. 20, 4 to 9 p.m. Edgewater Beach and Golf Resort. Details: www.visitpanamacitybeach.com

## Hootenanny Snowbird Events, Flora-Bama, Perdido Key

Four Hootenanny Snowbird events will be held this winter on Jan. 9 and 23 and Feb. 6 and 20 from 11 a.m. to 1 p.m. Presented under a giant tent in the historic "Roadhouse-style" entertainment complex with live music on the festive Flora-Bama stage, multiple vendors are offering samples and lunch is provided. Take a photo and share it with folks at home! Details: www.perdidokey.com

## St. George Island Farewell

This Snowbird Appreciation Day Dinner, hosted by the St. George Island Business Association, is on Feb. 11. The event includes dinner, raffles and music. Details: sgiba.com



## MEET MOBILE DAY

### Snowbird Expo

TUESDAY, JANUARY 7, 2025 | 1PM - 4PM

Erie H. Meyer Civic Center  
1930 West 2nd Street, Gulf Shores

Your winter adventure starts here! Discover Mobile's top attractions, dining options and experiences at the 2024 Snowbird Expo. Enjoy live entertainment, giveaways and door prizes.

**ENTRY IS FREE!**





## Snowbird Clubs

### FLORIDA

**PANAMA CITY BEACH:** Traditional winter resident Appreciation Days (also known as free Donut Days) will be staged again throughout the winter. Dates include, Jan. 10, (tickets for Homecoming available; Feb. 7, (tickets for Senior Prom available); and Feb. 18 (tickets for Grand Finale available). Details: Visit Panama City Beach, 850-233-5070 or [www.visitpanamacitybeach.com](http://www.visitpanamacitybeach.com)

**PCB SENIOR CENTER:** Stop by just about any day, and you will find something to do and friendly folks to meet. Annual membership is \$50. Residents participated in a variety of classes, including woodworking, playing the ukulele, pickleball, line dancing, doing exercises (including yoga and chair exercises), and creating a variety of crafts. Folks who want more information can join Coffee Shoppe and discover the complete list. The senior center is located at 423 Lyndell Lane, Panama City Beach, Fla. (next to the library), Details: 850-233-5065 or [pcbseniorcenter.com](http://pcbseniorcenter.com)

**WALTON SNOWBIRD CLUB:** The club netted more than 200 new members this

past season and overall had 724 members. Organizers and volunteers have put a lot of work into developing activities and trips (Biloxi and New Orleans) for members. Water aerobics, tennis, pickleball, singing, poker, mah jongg and other games, blood drives, book discussion, bowling, ballroom dance, basketball, biking, art and more! The club posts information on its Facebook page and website. Each year, the club awards two scholarships to Walton County High School seniors. Details: [www.waltoncountysnowbirdclub.com](http://www.waltoncountysnowbirdclub.com)

**DESTIN:** The club registered 1082 members this past year, including 961 from the USA, 120 from Canada and one from the UK. Club members meet weekly during winter at The Roost – aka Destin Community Center, 101 Stahlman Dr., Destin, Fla. TGIT (Thank Goodness It's Tuesday) ) at Lulu's., 4607 Legendary Marina Dr., Destin. Activities include bus trips and cruises to games, writer's group, quilting, crafts, singles groups, and activities such as golf, pickleball, bowling, basketball, softball and more. Local businesses generously donate

door prizes. 'Like' the club's Facebook page and bookmark the website. Details: [thedestinsnowbirds.com](http://thedestinsnowbirds.com)

**FORT WALTON:** Registration and meetings at the Fort Walton Beach Recreation Center, 132 Jet Drive, Fort Walton Beach, Fla. There are door prizes and 50/50 drawings. Monthly club social, golf, tennis, pickleball, card games, crafts and billiards, olf scrambles, Valentine's Day dance and more. Details: [fwbsbc.com](http://fwbsbc.com) or 920-619-4065.

**NAVARRE AND SANTA ROSA COUNTY:** Winter activities include a wide range of lectures conducted by local experts at the Navarre Welcome Center, 8543 Navarre Pkwy., Navarre, Fla. 3rd annual festival celebrates Navarre Beach's history and mingle with the community. The 2025 festival is on Jan. 16, from 2 to 4 p.m., at St. Sylvester Catholic Church. The theme is the Roaring 20's, and attendees are encouraged (but not required) to dress in 1920s attire. Vendors from local restaurants, shops, boutiques and more. Details: [Navarrechamber.com](http://Navarrechamber.com) or [www.getrelaxing.com](http://www.getrelaxing.com) or 850-981-8900.

**PERDIDO KEY:** The Perdido Key Chamber will again sponsor "Hootennany's" at the Flora-Bama Lounge. The visitor center is a popular stop for winter visitors (and this magazine can be found there). Details: 850-492-4660 or [www.perdidochamber.com](http://www.perdidochamber.com).

### ALABAMA

**IOWA:** All lowans and their guests are welcome to all club events; there is no membership fee. January and February breakfast meeting are at GT's On The Bay, 26189 Canal Road in Orange Beach, Ala. Reservations MUST be made by Noon one week prior. Sign up through our website, <http://iowa-alabamagulfcoastsnowbird.org> (preferred), or by calling Chris Hedlund at 319-430-4597. No late reservations accepted. The first breakfast meeting is at 8:15 a.m. on Jan. 15. At each breakfast, a 50/50 "voluntary" lottery will be held where half of the proceeds are used to help defray club, golf and cocktail party expenses and the other half is distributed to multiple "winners". Attendees can invest in a Calendar Drawing where, again, cash prizes are awarded. Tickets are \$10, with

## Winter Rates



Winter rates,  
beginning  
Dec 1, will be  
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all day, every day.

**\$63**  
on  
Monday and  
Tuesday for  
"Military Monday"  
and "Senior Tuesday"


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# Join the Club!



proceeds benefiting the Ft. Morgan, Gulf Shores and Orange Beach Fire Departments with drawings from mid-February to mid-March. Our first cocktail party is Jan. 24, 5 to 7 p.m., at the Caribe Resort, Bldg. D, 28103 Perdido Beach Blvd., Orange Beach. Bring your own beverage and a dish to share. No reservation is required. The Iowa golf schedule and sign-up for tee times are posted on the website. Check the website for updates, sign-ups, and a list of activities in the Gulf area.

**ILLINOIS:** Jan. 3 Welcome Back Coffee, 9 a.m. Orange Beach Adult Activity Center, 26251 Canal Rd., Orange Beach. Donuts, coffee and speaker. Details: Dixie Hammer at 815-767-8864. Bi-weekly Friday Breakfasts: Dates include Jan. 10 and 24 and Feb. 7 and 21 at GT's on the Bay, 26351 Canal Rd., Orange Beach. Doors open at 7:45 a.m., buffet breakfast begins at 8 a.m. Door prizes and speaker. Reservations necessary, \$14 per person. Call Lu Douglas at 815-541-9952. Potlucks & Games, OB Adult Activity Center, 26251 Canal Rd. OB. Tuesdays, Jan. 14 & Feb. 11, 5 p.m. Bring a dish to pass and cards or board game. Sign up at Welcome

Back Coffee or call Dixie Hammer at 815-767-8864. ALL Snowbirds are welcome to join these events. Join the Facebook page for schedule and area events.

**MICHIGAN:** Meetings resume in January at The Island Church, 25550 Canal Rd., Orange Beach, Ala. Coffee and doughnuts are served at 9 a.m., and the meeting starts at 10 a.m. Annual membership is \$5 per person. Merchandise is for sale at the meetings. A full schedule of golf outings is available on the website: [www.michiganclubalabama.com](http://www.michiganclubalabama.com) or [michiganclubalabama@gmail.com](mailto:michiganclubalabama@gmail.com)

**MISSOURI:** All snowbirds are invited! Meetings are 8:30 a.m. Wednesdays at Tacky Jacks, 240 E 24th Ave., Gulf Shores, Ala. The cost is \$14 and includes a buffet breakfast, tax and tip. RSVP on the website. Mixed golf scramble every Wednesday at 1 p.m., Gulf Shores Country Club, 520 Clubhouse Dr., Gulf Shores, Ala. Weekly Happy Hour, 4 p.m. Mondays at Cobalt, 28099 Perdido Beach Blvd., Orange Beach, Ala. RSVP on the website. Details: [missourisnowbirds.org](http://missourisnowbirds.org) or [mer2@charter.net](mailto:mer2@charter.net)

**MINNESOTA:** Weekly Tuesday breakfast

meetings at GT's on the Bay, 26189 Canal Rd., Orange Beach. Doors open at 7:30 a.m., breakfast, 8:15 a.m. Minimum of 75 to host the breakfast meetings through Mar. 14. Cost is \$12 per person, and sign-up is the prior Tuesday at [www.mnal.org](http://www.mnal.org). Tuesday lunch meetings are mid-March through May at The Ugly Diner, 2200 E. 2nd St., Gulf Shores. Details: [MNSnowbird1@mnal.org](mailto:MNSnowbird1@mnal.org)

**NEW YORK:** Return to the Alabama-Florida Gulf Coast for another winter of great weather, socializing, golf, and fund-raising. They kick off the winter season on Jan. 9 at Ginny Lanes in Orange Beach at the Wharf, gathering at 11 a.m., followed by lunch (ordering off the menu with separate checks). \$1 per person donation requested cover club costs and lunch for our guest speakers. There's a 50-50 raffle to create a treasury for donations to the needs of our host communities. Door prizes. Reservations required by email to [nysnowbirds@gmail.com](mailto:nysnowbirds@gmail.com). Gather at Ginny Lane every other week throughout the winter on Jan. 23, February 6 and 20, and Mar. 6. Hoping for good participation in 2025. Contact: Frank Panczyszyn, [fpancyzy@gmail.com](mailto:fpancyzy@gmail.com).

585-682-3477 or 585-748-0432.

**PENNSYLVANIA:** The Pennsylvania Snowbird Club meets weekly for breakfast at 9 a.m. on Wednesdays at Buzz Kats restaurant on Canal Road in Orange Beach beginning Jan. 8 and continuing through Mar. 5. Contact: Rich Smith, 610-217-6674.

**WISCONSIN:** Join online or before a meeting. Annual dues are \$4. Members pay \$2 each at the door. Meet at the Orange Beach Event Center on Jan. 8 and 22. Coffee and donuts at 8:30 a.m., meetings at 9 a.m. Card playing Fridays Jan. 2 - Mar. 28 at The Lighthouse, 455 East Beach Blvd., Gulf Shores. Details: Kenn at 715-927-3927 or [www.wisconsinsnobirds.com](http://www.wisconsinsnobirds.com). Snobird Singles Lunch: Jan. 14 at 11:30 at Wolf Bay at 24131 Perdido Beach Blvd., Orange Beach; Feb. 11, 11:30 a.m. at Oyster House, 701 Gulf Shores Pkwy. in Gulf Shores. Singles Dinners: Jan. 28, 4 p.m., The Groovy Goat, 105 A S. OWA Blvd., Foley.; Feb. 25, 4 p.m., Cosmos, 25753 Canal Rd., Orange Beach. Details: Tom Chestnut at [tac.smc.14@gmail.com](mailto:tac.smc.14@gmail.com). Details: [www.wisconsinsnobirds.com](http://www.wisconsinsnobirds.com) or Wisconsinsnobirds on Facebook.

Sponsored by the Santa Rosa Island Authority and Pensacola Beach Chamber of Commerce

## 10TH ANNUAL SNOWBIRD BEACH BASH

THURSDAY  JANUARY 23



**9:00 AM**  
Coffee and a light breakfast sponsored by Emmanuel Sheppard & Condon

**10:00 AM**  
Nathan Nickerson Magician & Mentalist

**10:45 AM**  
Bingo and door prizes with DJ Salty

Our Lady of the Assumption | 920 Via De Luna Dr. • For more info call 850-932-1500 or 850-932-2257  
Get your WINTER ESCAPE DISCOUNT CARD at the Pensacola Beach Visitor Information Center!

\$1 ENTRY FEE - 100% of proceeds benefit the Pensacola Beach Jr. Lifeguard Program



Tue., Feb. 4, 9am-1pm | Orange Beach Events Center (at The Wharf)

## 2025 10th Annual Snowbird Fest

Anticipated Lineup of Events:

- Business Expo
- **New Entertainment!**
- Car Shine & Show
- Free Restaurant Samples & Coffee
- **Door Prizes & Give-Aways**
- Pet & Magic Acts, & so much more!



**Snowbirds attend FREE!**  
PRE-register online & enter to **Win prizes!**

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## The World Famous Glenn Miller Orchestra

Feb. 6, 2025 - National Naval Aviation Museum

The Glenn Miller Orchestra will perform at the National Naval Aviation Museum in Pensacola, Fla., on Thursday, February 6 at 7 p.m. This live concert promises an unforgettable evening filled with the classic sounds of big band jazz, featuring iconic hits like "In the Mood," "Rhapsody in Blue," and "Moonlight Serenade." Under the direction of Erik Stabnau, the orchestra will showcase the timeless arrangements that made them famous, with Jenny Swoish as the lead vocalist.

Set against the backdrop of the National Naval Aviation Museum, a landmark that celebrates the rich history of naval aviation, this event blends music with history in a truly unique way. The museum is home to numerous aircraft and exhibits that highlight America's naval heritage, making it an ideal setting for the Glenn Miller Orchestra's performance. Ticket prices are \$65 for preferred seating and \$40 for general admission. Tickets are available at <https://navalaviationfoundation.org/glenn-miller/>.

Through 1/5/25

**29th Annual Magic Christmas in Lights at Bellingrath Gardens & Home** - 8 a.m. to 9 p.m. Lights turned on by 5 p.m. Wander through a dazzling 65-acre Garden estate adorned with thousands of lights. Closed Dec. 25 and Jan. 1. 12401 Bellingrath Gardens Rd., Theodore, Ala. Details: <https://bellingrath.org/>

1/3,4,10,11,18,19,24,25

**Cooking Classes At Rouses** - 10 a.m. Come see what's cooking at Rouses and learn to make favorite dishes! Classes in the Orange Beach store on

Jan. 3, 10 and 24. Classes in the Gulf Shores location on Jan 4, 11, 18, 19 and 25. Learn more about everything Rouses has to offer at <https://www.rouses.com>.

1/4-5

**Bee Gees Now: The Premier Bee Gees Tribute** - Celebrates the iconic music and timeless charisma of the legendary Bee Gees. From the soulful hits like How Deep Is Your Love to the dance floor anthems like Stayin' Alive and Night Fever, this tribute will transport you back to the golden age of the 70's. 205 N OWA Blvd., Foley, Ala. Details: <https://visitowa.com/entertainment/owa-theater/>

<https://visitowa.com/entertainment/owa-theater/>

1/7

**Meet Mobile Day Snowbird Expo** - 1 to 4 p.m. Learn about all the amazing dining, shopping, entertainment and attractions Mobile, Ala. has to offer! 1930 W. 2nd St., Gulf Shores, Ala. Details: <https://www.mobile.org>

1/16

**Annual Navarre Beach Snowbirds Festival** - 2 to 4 p.m. Get ready to transport back in time to the glamorous era of the Roaring 20's. Jazz music, dancing, delectable light bites and a whole lot of fun! St. Sylvester

Catholic Church, 6464 Gulf Breeze Pkwy., Gulf Breeze, Fla. Details: <https://business.navarrechamber.com>

1/16

**Where Sea Meets Sky Opening Reception** - The exhibition, Where Sea Meets Sky, is a collaboration between the Walter Anderson Museum of Art and artist Mary Louise Porter. 510 Washington Avenue, Ocean Springs, Miss. Details: <https://www.walterandersonmuseum.org/whereseameetssky>

1/17

**Blues Masters Tribute Show** - 6 p.m. A tribute to the BLUES MASTERS.

From BB King

to Gary Moore, to SRV to Carlos Santana. Alabama Gulf Coast Music Hall, 12615-A Foley Beach Express Foley, Ala. Details: <https://www.bluesmusiciansociety.com/>

**Bette, Babs, & Beyond** - 7:30 p.m. Bette Midler, Barbra Streisand, Dolly Parton, Tina Turner, Carole King, Aretha Franklin, Cher, and Adele are among the female icons honored in this concert event. At the Destin—Fort Walton Convention Center. Details: [SinfoniaGulfCoast.org](https://SinfoniaGulfCoast.org).



## What are you doing New Year's Eve?

### New Year's Eve at Windjammers

- Kick off 2025 at the Navarre Pier beginning at 9 p.m. with fireworks at midnight! 8579 Gulf Blvd., Navarre Beach, Fla. Details: <https://windjammersonthe pier.com/>

### New Year's Eve at Beau Rivage with The Molly Ringwalds

- 10:30 p.m. 875 Beach Boulevard, Biloxi, Miss. Details: <https://beaurivage.mgmresorts.com/en/entertainment/headliners.html>

**Grande Celebration at HarborWalk Village** - Dance away 2024 with an evening full of live entertainment. Enjoy a dazzling firework display over the Harbor and countdown the Ball Drop, welcoming a New Year! 10 Harbor Blvd., Destin, Fla. Details: <https://sowal.com>



**The Drop on Government** - Make plans to be in Ocean Springs to welcome 2025! 2685 Government Street, Ocean Springs, Miss. Details: <https://www.facebook.com/oceanspringsms/>

**Reelin' in the New Year Street Party at The Wharf** - Welcome 2025 with live bands, family friendly activities AND adult-centered

fun all rounding off at midnight with The Park Band, the Kentucky Mist New Year Countdown marlin drop and a fireworks finale! Details: <https://alwharf.com/events>

**Pensacola Symphony Orchestra: Celebrate the New Year!** - 7 p.m. A swinging evening of classic standards from Gershwin, Berlin and friends. Pensacola's Saenger Theatre, 118

South Palafox Place, Pensacola, Fla. Details: [PensacolaSymphony.com](https://PensacolaSymphony.com).

**Midnight on Front Street** - Join Hattiesburg to ring in the new year at Midnight on Front Street, an event dating back to 1912. Details: <https://www.visithburg.org/events/midnight-on-front-street/>

**New Year's Eve Fireworks** - Midnight. Free firework display along the Santa Rosa Sound and along the Pensacola Beach Boardwalk. Details: <https://www.pensacolabeachchamber.com/new-years-eve-firework-display/>

**Flora-Bama's New Year's Eve Bash** - Live music, all-you-can-eat buffet, party favors, and champagne toast at midnight. Details: <https://www.florabama.com/>

1/18

**Chi-Town Transit Authority: A Tribute to the Music of Chicago** - 7:30 p.m. Feel the magic of Chicago's greatest hits with powerful brass sections, rich harmonies, and all the energy that made the band a classic. 205 N OWA Blvd., Foley, Ala. Details: <https://visitowa.com/entertainment/owa-theater/>

1/18/25-2/18/25

**Gulf Shores 2020 Winter Series at the Erie Meyer Civic Center** - Events: Jan. 27-28 – Larry Gatlin; Feb. 3-4 – Einstein!; Feb. 10-11 – What a Wonderful World; Feb. 17-18 – Forever Motown. 1930 W. 2nd St., Gulf Shores, Ala. Details: <https://www.gulfshoresal.gov/winterconcertseries>

1/22

**Floral Seminar** – 10 a.m. The Gulf Shores Garden Club presents celebrity floral and event designer Scot Wedgeworth from the Bama Glama on Food Network. For tickets, call Charlotte at 205-410-3190 or visit Island Enclosures or the Gulf Shores Public Library. Erie Meyer Civic Center, Gulf Shores, Ala. Proceeds fund the club's scholarship program. Details: <https://www.gulfshoresgardenclub.com/floral-seminar>

1/25 - 2/9

**Little Shop of Horrors** - Little Shop of Horrors follows meek plant store attendant Seymour and the man-eating plant that threatens the world as we know it. Details: [www.emeraldcoasttheatre.org](http://www.emeraldcoasttheatre.org)

2/8

**3rd annual Birds & Brews event** - 11 a.m. to 3 p.m. E.O. Wilson Biophilia Center, 4956 State Hwy. 20 E., Freeport, Fla. Details: <https://www.facebook.com/BiophiliaCenter>



2/15

**Tropical Reunion Wedding Vow Renewals at LuLu's** - Looking for a romantic Valentine's Day present for your spouse? Celebrate your love by renewing your wedding vows at LuLu's locations in Gulf Shores, Ala. and Destin, Fla. Register online and get more details: [www.LuLusFunFoodMusic.com](http://www.LuLusFunFoodMusic.com)

2/21-22

**Mardi Gras with The Mystic Krewe of Salty Barkers** - A lively street festival and the 14th Annual Mardi Gras Pet Parade celebrate dogs and their people! Live music, costume contests, silent auction and more. The theme is "Game of Bones - the Canine Kingdom Rules." Details and full schedule of events: <https://saltybarkers.org/>

# Plunge into 2025!

**Polar Bear Plunge** – Noon to 3 p.m. Need an exhilarating rush to help kick off your new year? Head to Pensacola Beach and plunge headfirst into the Santa Rosa Sound at the annual Polar Bear Plunge. Hosted by Paradise Inn/Bar & Grill, hundreds of dippers and spectators – many dressed in costume - flock to the beach to participate in this long-established tradition. Details: <https://www.pensacolabeachchamber.com/polar-bear-plunge/>

**Pier Plunge at Windjammers** - Noon. Brave the not-so-icy Gulf waters and celebrate with live music and drink specials. 8579 Gulf Blvd., Navarre Beach, Fla. Details: <https://windjammersonthe pier.com/>

**12th Annual Penguin Plunge'n Paddle on Navarre Beach** - 12 to 4 p.m., Juana's Pagodas and Sailors' Grill, 1451 Navarre Beach Causeway, Navarre Beach, Fl. Paddleboard course, live music, raffle and more! Benefitting Healing Paws for Warriors. Details: [juanaspagodas.com](http://juanaspagodas.com) or 850-939-1092.

**South Walton Fire Department Polar Bear Plunge** – 11 a.m. Participants are invited to Shunk Gulley Oyster Bar starting at 11 a.m. to pick up

their event towel after the completion of the online registration process. The annual costume contest begins at 12 p.m., followed by the plunge at 1 p.m. at Ed Walline Beach Access. The funds raised benefit SWFD's 2025 Community Education Programs. 1875 South County Highway 393 Santa Rosa Beach, Fla. <https://www.eventbrite.com/e/south-walton-fire-district-2025-polar-bear-plunge-tickets-1105904974549>

**Polar Bear Dip in Gulf Shores** - The fun and free hot chocolate starts at 10 a.m. with a plunge into the Gulf at the public beach at noon south of the Hangout. Locals, snowbirds, and visitors are invited to join this uniquely coastal beach party. The event is free. Donations are encouraged with proceeds benefitting Alabama Special Olympics and the Kiwanis Club of Gulf Shores. Details: <https://alabama.travel/upcoming-events/gulf-shores-polar-bear-dip>

**The Flora-Bama Polar Bear Dip** – Noon. Groups and families gather in costume, swim suits and some even in wet suits to feel the brisk salt water on their face. Those who fully submerge will get a free draft beer and a free New Year's lunch of ham, black-eyed peas, greens and cornbread. Details: <https://www.florabama.com/polar-bear-dip>

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850.460.8800

## Gulf Breeze Hospital Earns Five-Star CMS Rating Seventh Year in a Row

The Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services (CMS) recently awarded Gulf Breeze Hospital a five-star rating on its Hospital Compare website for the seventh year in a row. Gulf Breeze Hospital was only one of 15 hospitals in the state of Florida and the only hospital in Northwest Florida to earn five stars.

Gulf Breeze Hospital, an affiliate of Baptist Health Care, ranks among the top hospitals in the United States. It is the only five-star rated hospital in Northwest Florida. Located in south Santa Rosa County, Gulf Breeze Hospital has earned a five-star rating for seven consecutive years and, in June 2025, will celebrate 40 years of serving the community.

Services at Gulf Breeze Hospital include:

- 24-hour emergency department
- A broad range of inpatient and outpatient services
- Stroke Care Center
- Lab and imaging services
- Experienced doctors and caregivers

Hospitals are assessed on publicly reported data in the Hospital Consumer Assessment of Healthcare Providers and Systems (HCAHPS) survey and include patient experience, timely and effective care, complications, readmissions, use of medical imaging and value of care. The Overall Hospital Quality Star Rating is designed to help individuals, their family members and caregivers compare the quality of care at over 4,000 Medicare-certified hospitals across the country.

For more information, visit [ebaptisthealthcare.org/gulfbreezehospital](http://ebaptisthealthcare.org/gulfbreezehospital).



### Panama City Non-Profit:

Most Snowbirds have either American or Canadian healthcare plans but in the Panama City region there is an expanding option.

PanCare offers a wide range of services from Primary Care, Dental, Chronic Care Management, Diabetes Management, Optometry Behavioral Health and even telehealth.

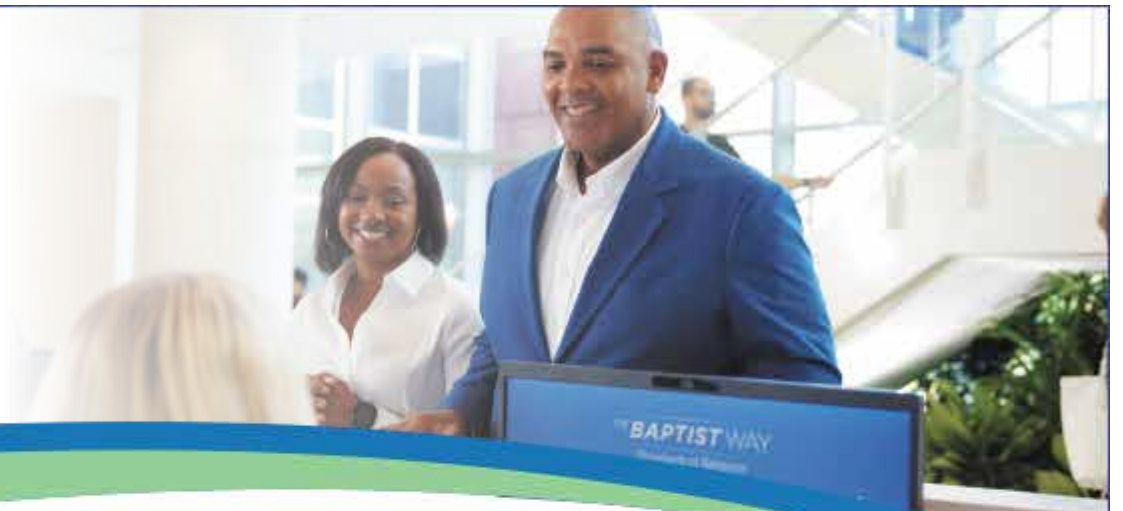
The group also offers a pharmacy.

A mobile clinic is offered with primary locations in the Panama City area. Clinic options vary with locations at Gulf State College and many surrounding rural locations including Port St. Joe, Wewahitcka, Freeport, Malone, Carabelle, Chipley, Freeport, Blountstown, Bonifay and several others.

For those that need it, a sliding scale is offered.

Details are available online at: [www.pancarefl.org](http://www.pancarefl.org)

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[ebaptisthealthcare.org](http://ebaptisthealthcare.org)

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## Libraries across the coast offer book clubs, tech events, bingo, knitting and more

The libraries in cities and counties across the region offer plenty to do during January for Snowbirds and events for their grandchildren.

In Okaloosa County, Fla., the libraries offer different book clubs:

The **Destin Library** has a Novel Idea Book Club every Thursday in January from 11:30 a.m. to 1:30 p.m. every Thursday. The focus is on a variety of fiction titles with an occasional nonfiction choice.

The **Fort Walton Beach Library** has a Mystery by the Book Club dedicated to mystery and detective novels from noon to 1 p.m. on Thursdays, starting Jan. 2.

The **Crestview Library** has a rock painting class from 1 to 3 p.m. on the second Wednesday of every month. Come express your creativity, meet new people, and take home a beautiful, hand-painted rock. Details: <https://okaloosa.librarycalendar.com/index.php/events/list>.

**Orange Beach, Ala.:** The library at 26267 Canal Road offers a Technology Class each Monday in January from 2:30 to 3:30 p.m. The topic on Jan. 6 is 3D printing basics, with other topics later in the month. Its annual book sale is also in January. Details: <https://www.orangebeachlibrary.net/>

**Biloxi, Miss.:** The library is located at 580 Howard Ave. To check out events, go to <https://www.harrison.lib.ms.us/calendar/>.

**Gulf Shores, Ala.:** The library, at 221 West 19th Avenue, has Winter Tech classes at 10:30 a.m. on Fridays during January, February and March in the Library meeting room with a variety of topics, including Pinterest, apps and

Windows 11. Details: <https://www.gulfshoresal.gov/924/Library>

**Pensacola, Fla.:** The West Florida Library system will have its annual winter book sale on Jan. 24-26 at the Pensacola branch. For other events, go to <https://mywfpl.com/>.

**Santa Rosa County, Fla.:** The senior social will be on Jan. 16 at the Gulf Breeze library. Adults ages 50+ are invited to visit the library for coffee, conversation, arts & crafts activities, and games. Website: <https://www.santarosa.fl.gov/calendar.aspx?CID=30>

**Walton County Library**, with branches in Santa Rosa Beach, DeFuniak Springs and Freeport, offers a variety of events, including chess, yoga, Zumba, line dancing and knitting. Details: <https://waltonlibraries.com/events/month/2025-01/>.

**Port St. Joe, Fla.:** The Corinne Costin Gibson Memorial Public Library at Library Drive, offers Family Tales, Neighborhood Gossip, and Pure Fabrication with Storyteller Robyn Rennick on Jan. 7 from 2-3 p.m. EST. The library also has Seaside Stitchers for those interest in knitting. Details: <https://www.nwrls.com/events/category/locations/corinne-costin-gibson-memorial-public-library/>

**Panama City Beach:** The library at 12500 Hutchison Boulevard offers Sea Needles on Jan. 7 from 10 a.m. to noon. Join the group and make new friends as you work on your own sewing, knitting or crochet project. Stop by the library display case to see some of the beautiful-finished projects. Play bingo on Jan. 15 from 10 to 11 a.m. Details: <https://www.nwrls.com/events/category/locations/panama-city-beach-library/>



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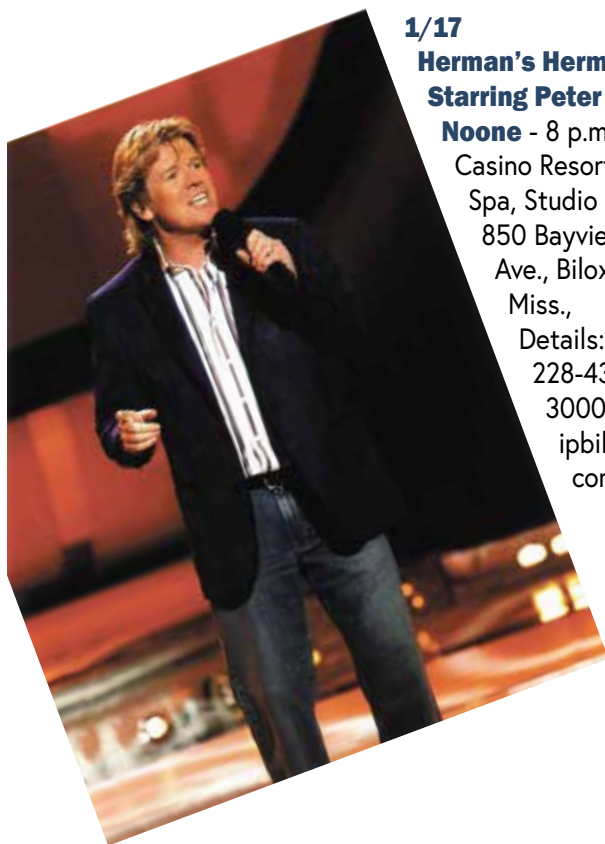
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# Casino Fun

**1/11**

**Rickey Smiley** - Beau Rivage Resort & Casino, 875 Beach Blvd., Biloxi, Miss. Details: 888-566-7469 or www.beaurivage.com



**1/17**

**Herman's Hermits Starring Peter**

**Noone** - 8 p.m. IP Casino Resort & Spa, Studio A, 850 Bayview Ave., Biloxi, Miss., Details: 228-436-3000 or ipbiloxi.com

**2/1**

**Michael Bolton** - Beau Rivage Resort & Casino, 875 Beach Blvd., Biloxi, Miss. Details: 888-566-7469 or www.beaurivage.com

**2/ 7-8**

**Rodney Carrington** - Beau Rivage Resort & Casino, 875 Beach Blvd., Biloxi, Miss. Details: 888-566-7469 or www.beaurivage.com



**2/21**

**Stayin Alive, Bee Gees Tribute** - Hard Rock Biloxi, 777 Beach Blvd., Biloxi, Miss. Details: www.hrhcbiloxi.com

**2/28**

**Brett Young** - Beau Rivage Resort & Casino, 875 Beach Blvd., Biloxi, Miss. Details: 888-566-7469 or www.beaurivage.com



**3/1**

**Ron White** -

Beau Rivage Resort & Casino, 875 Beach Blvd., Biloxi, Miss. Details: 888-566-7469 or www.beaurivage.com



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## Senior Bowl comes to Mobile in February: Where the NFL starts

### Senior Bowl

As its website says, the Reese's Senior Bowl is where the NFL starts. This year's game will be played in Mobile at the University of South Alabama on Feb. 1 and televised by the NFL Network.

The game features top senior college football players, who spend the week in Mobile practicing and playing under the watchful eyes of NFL coaches and scouts ahead of the NFL Draft in April.

Go to <https://www.seniorbowl.com/> for ticket information.

### NOLA NBA

For Snowbirds who follow their favorite NBA team at home, they have a chance to root for them when they come south to play the Pelicans in New Orleans at the Smoothie King Center. The Pelicans host the Minnesota Timberwolves on Jan. 7, the Milwaukee Bucks on Jan. 22, the Boston Celtics on Jan. 31 and the Detroit Pistons on Mar. 17. Ticket information: <https://www.nba.com/pelicans/>.

### College basketball

For Snowbirds who prefer watching college basketball, the Gulf Coast offers



plenty of teams at several different levels. For NCAA Division I play, head to Mobile to watch the University of South Alabama teams play in the Sun Belt Conference.

Go west to Pensacola for some Division II action, where the University of West Florida plays in the Gulf South Conference. The University of Mobile plays on the NAIA level.

And there's plenty of junior college basketball to watch: Pensacola Junior

College, Northwest Florida State College in Fort Walton Beach, Chipola State College in Chipola and Gulf Coast State College in Panama City. As an added bonus, in early March, Pensacola will host the men's and women's Sun Belt Conference basketball championships where the winners will earn automatic bids to the NCAA Tournament.

<https://usajaguars.com/>  
<https://goargos.com/>

<https://umobilerams.com/sports/>  
<https://athletics.pensacolastate.edu/navbar-sports>  
<https://www.nwfraidiers.com/landing/>  
<https://www.chipolaathletics.com/landing/>  
<https://www.gcathletics.com/sports/>

### Pensacola Ice Flyers hockey

Hockey continues in Pensacola as the Ice Flyers compete in the Southern Professional Hockey League. Single-game and mini-season ticket plans are available. For more information, go to [www.iceflyers.com](http://www.iceflyers.com). Ice Flyers home games in January at the Pensacola Civic Center:

Jan. 3 – vs. Birmingham, 7:05 p.m.

Jan. 12 – vs. Macon, 4:05 p.m.

Jan. 17 – vs. Fayetteville, 7:05 p.m.

Jan. 18 – vs. Fayetteville, 7:05 p.m.

Jan. 19 – vs. Fayetteville, 4:05 p.m.

**Biloxi Sea Wolves:** The Sea Wolves play in the Mississippi Coast Coliseum in Biloxi. The team is part of the Federal Prospects Hockey League.

Their home games in January are Jan. 3, 4, 5, 24, 25 and 26. Go to <https://www.mississippiawolves.com/> for tickets and more information.

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## Pets and owners laissez les bons temps rouler at animal-friendly Mardi Gras parades

### Spectators Will Marvel At Kids and Kritters Parade

Is your mutt marvelous? Will your kid wear a cape? The Kids and Kritters Parade theme is "MARVELous Mardi Gras – A Super Celebration." The Mardi Gras walking parade for people and pets is set for Feb. 8 at 2 p.m. in the Casino Beach parking lot near the Pensacola Beach Visitor Information Center on Pensacola Beach. There is ample, free parking and spectators are encouraged to attend. Bring a bag to haul your beads and trinkets home.

The fun begins at noon when the featured fun guests open their kiosks. Get ready to tap your toes at 1:30 p.m. when the talented troupe from Dancingly Yours headlines the pre-parade show. The Kids and Kritters Parade, a walking parade for people and pets, starts at 2 p.m. Grand Marshals are Burma Davis and her horse Jesse, followed by Pensacola Beach's Krewe of Kids' Royal Court and krewe members.

The parade is open to anyone who would like to participate in this family-friendly event. Registration begins at Noon. To participate, you must wear a costume and bring your own Mardi Gras throws. No candy or paper coupons, please. Pets must be on a short, sturdy leash and under the control of the handler. Everyone must be on their best behavior. People pay no entry fee, and pets pay just \$10 each.

There will be prizes for the best-costumed pets and the best mini-floats.

Mini floats can be made on strollers or wagons. Anything that can be pushed or pulled is allowed. Motorized and pedaled vehicles are not allowed—no skateboards,

bicycles or battery-powered vehicles.

The parade is hosted by Pensacola Beach Mardi Gras, Inc. and sponsored by Gulf Breeze Animal Hospital with the help of Island Times Newspaper—a special thank you to the Santa Rosa Island Authority and the Pensacola Beach Chamber for their support.

Additional details can be found at [PensacolaBeachMardiGras.com](http://PensacolaBeachMardiGras.com). Questions may be directed to [parade@pensacolabeachmardigras.com](mailto:parade@pensacolabeachmardigras.com).

**4th Annual Pensacola Pawdi Gras Block Party:** This free annual event is set for 11 a.m. – 4 p.m. Feb. 16 and is staged over several blocks in downtown Pensacola. Prizes are awarded in several categories. A \$15 donation is requested, with proceeds going to Escambia County Department of Animal Welfare. Register online at [wolfgangparkandbrews.com](http://wolfgangparkandbrews.com)

**Apalachicola:** The Mystic Krewe of Salty Barkers celebrated Mardi Gras Apalachicola-style bigger and better than ever this year, with two days of fun. The celebration includes a lively street festival and, of course, the 14th Annual Mardi Gras Pet Parade. This event celebrates dogs and their people on Friday and Saturday, Feb. 21 and 22, in Apalachicola. All visitors and their furry friends are invited to join this paw-some event.

The theme for the 2025 event is "Game of Bones - the Canine Kingdom Rules". It will be tail-wagging fun to journey into an imaginary world of canines and castles. Parading pups and their people will be wearing costumes inspired by the noble houses of the Seven Kingdoms. Guests can expect regal kings and queens, magicians, brave knights, rogues, lots of daring dragons, and a mystical creature or two. The creativity and spirit guests bring to this spectacle of sword and sorcery will be a sight to see.

New this year, the festivities kick off with an exciting day of fun and frivolity on



While strolling through the park, guests enjoy live music, street entertainers, and more than 40 local vendors offering a variety of food and arts and crafts to enjoy. Saturday's parade of decorated golf carts, boats, floats, and walkers – both the four-legged and two-legged kind – begins at 1 p.m. The parade of costumed dogs and their people kicks off at Riverfront Park and winds through town, ending at the park where the party will continue with raucous fun. Registration is \$5 for walkers, \$25 for golf carts, and \$50 for floats. Canine companions are free.

The parade isn't just for fun; it's also for a good cause. The Mystic Krewe of Salty Barkers is partnering with local animal rescues to raise awareness and funds for animals in need. Not only will attendees have a great time, but they will also make a difference for injured animals and those looking for their forever homes. The King and Queen of Apalachicola's Mardi Gras parade are always shelter animals who are ready for a forever home. As always, they will have a place of honor in the parade.

Pre-register at [saltybarkers.org](http://saltybarkers.org). For more information, visit [saltybarkers.org](http://saltybarkers.org).

Friday, Feb. 21, from 2 to 8 p.m. Guests can enjoy the Fido-Do, an old-fashioned Mardi Gras street event. Highlights of Friday's activities include street entertainment, an adopters reunion, live music, a beer and wine garden featuring local craft brews, costume and decorating contests, dragon relay races, and a live auction.

The festivities will run from 11 a.m. to 4 p.m. at Apalachicola's Riverfront Park.



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# Planes, trains and buses making Gulf Coast travel fun and easy

Allegiant Travel Company has announced 44 new nonstop routes, including 11 routes to three new cities: Gulf Shores, Alabama; Colorado Springs, Colorado; and Columbia, South Carolina.



Starting in February, the flights will expand the airline's network options in 51 cities around the country, offering convenient, affordable air service to premier vacation destinations.

Additionally, the airline has added three airports to its network: Gulf Shores International Airport (GUF), Colorado Springs Airport (COS) and Columbia Metropolitan Airport (CAE). This addition, one of Allegiant's largest service expansions in its history, is driven by robust leisure demand and the company's commitment to providing ultra-low-cost airfare to underserved communities with limited or no air service.

A core aspect of Allegiant's business model is to provide service during periods with strong leisure demand, such as holidays, summer, weekends and school breaks. The new routes from Gulf Shores International Airport (GUF) in Alabama include: Great Smoky Mountains National Park/Knoxville, Tennessee via McGhee Tyson Airport (TYS) – beginning May 21, 2025, with one-way fares as low as \$49; Cincinnati, Ohio via Cincinnati/Northern Kentucky International Airport (CVG) – beginning May 22, 2025 with one-way fares as low as \$59 and Houston, Texas via William P. Hobby Airport (HOU) – beginning May 22, 2025 with one-way fares as low as \$49.

Allegiant also offers service into Destin/Fort Walton Beach. Details: [allegiantair.com](http://allegiantair.com) or 866-432-6165.

**RAIL RETURNS:** Much of the northern Gulf Coast has been without rail service for nearly two decades, but Amtrak announced in October that it is making a return this spring from Mobile, Ala. to New Orleans. From there, Amtrak offers routes

north to Chicago and the California west coast. A 10 percent discount is available for passengers over age 65.

**Good Time Tours:** The long-established charter bus company offers daily bus trip options to the region's casinos.

Departure cities include Gulf Shores, Fairhope and Loxley. Florida cities include Pensacola, Destin, Mary Esther and Navarre. Overnight trips this winter



include Cajun Encounters Feb. 1-2 from Florida and Feb. 5-6 from Gulf Shores and Mobile, Ala. The itinerary includes two plantations, a Gator Ranch, a stop at the Cajun Village Arts & Crafts, a one-night hotel stay, two lunches, one dinner and one breakfast. The cost is \$275 per person, double occupancy and also includes motorcoach transportation.

A variety of other tours are offered. Details: [goodtimetours.com](http://goodtimetours.com) or 850-476-0046.

**SUN COUNTRY:** The Beau Rivage Resort and Casino and Sun Country airlines offer dozens of weekly packages into the Gulfport/Biloxi Airport. Details: [beaurivagetrips.com](http://beaurivagetrips.com) or 678-546-8700.



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# The Time I Made a Graduation Speech

*Sean of the South*



It's weird. Standing on this stage. In this arena. I'm looking at a thousand faces. Many of them are about to be college graduates.

And they're all looking back at me so hopefully, so full of wonder, so wide-eyed and eager, as if to say, "I hope this idiot's speech isn't too long."

Right now, I am making a commencement speech at Northwest Florida State College. I am wearing a suit. Also deodorant. Everyone is sitting in the basketball arena, clad in big robes and flat hats, staring directly at me. I believe many of the graduates are also wearing deodorant.

Most of the graduates are young. Their parents are present, quietly reading through their programs as I speak. Scanning the alphabetical list of graduates' names printed on the program. I can see many parents are just now realizing how many graduate names are on the program today. If, by chance, someone's last name is, for example, "Williams," or "Zimmerman," these people will be stuck in this arena until the installation of the next pope.

Funny thing. This basketball arena wasn't here when I attended the school, long ago, shortly after the end of the Spanish-American War. Back before most of these graduates were born.

Northwest Florida State wasn't even called that. We were Okaloosa-Walton Community College back then. We were just a couple outdated brick buildings, some double-wide trailers, and a drinking fountain that didn't work.

I attended this school as an adult. On a whim, I walked into Admissions Building C, and I told the ladies behind the desk that I wanted to go to college. I told them I was a middle-school dropout. I told them I had quit school in the seventh grade after my father died.

I told them we were poor folks. My mother lived in a FEMA trailer. I drove a vehicle that predated the Carter Administration. I worked construction

by day, I played music in beach bars by night.

I had no transcripts. No school experience. It was a wonder I even could even spell my name.

I told the woman behind the desk that I was probably wasting my time applying to college. There was no way the powers that be would let a loser like me into this school. Maybe I should just leave.

The woman smiled. And I'll never forget when that kindhearted woman behind the desk in Building C looked me square in the eye and said, "When in doubt, just pretend you know what the hell you're doing."

The ladies behind the admissions desk made a way for me. I still don't know how those women got someone like me into college, nor do I know whether their actions were, technically, legal.

The ladies showed me how to get financial aid. They helped me purchase used textbooks online. They showed me how to change my own life. That same afternoon, I went to a thrift store and bought my first backpack. I purchased my first pencil sharpener.

College was the greatest twelve years of my life. On this campus, I completed remedial high-school education courses. I completed college courses. I sat in classrooms alongside construction workers, ditch diggers, plumbers, military officers, infantrymen, and Hooters waitresses.

I learned how to write the English language on this campus.

I did homework in my car, parked in this parking lot, while choking down Whataburger. I attended night classes, with tired professors, and dedicated students who sometimes brought their toddlers to class, and frequently changed their toddlers' dirty diapers right on top of their desks, showing the entire classroom their child's bare white aspirations.

When I graduated, we did the ceremony in Building K. I don't even know if Building K exists anymore. There was a small, plywood stage in the old cafeteria. There, I received a little piece of paper with my name on it.

That little piece of paper changed everything. Not because it led me to a career. Not because the paper made me somebody different. I'm still the same guy I was back then, only with better auto insurance. But that piece of paper led me here. To you.

I am standing on this platform, in an arena, looking directly at the future of America. And the future of America is actually listening to what I have to say. Well, maybe sixty-percent of the future is listening.

Ironically, the future of America is waiting for me to offer some bit of wisdom for their lives because that is what the college faculty paid me to do, although many members of the college faculty are currently wondering whether they made a poor decision.

But I do have something to share with you. It is the only wisdom I have. This wisdom came to me a long, long time ago. Over in Building C. It is sage wisdom which I am putting to use at this very moment, while standing behind this podium.

When in doubt, just pretend you know what you're doing.

**Sean Dietrich** is a columnist, humorist, multi-instrumentalist, and stand-up storyteller known for his commentary on life in the American South.

His work has appeared in Newsweek, Southern Living, Reader's Digest, Garden and Gun, and his column appears weekly in newspapers throughout the U.S. He has authored 18 books and over 4,000 columns. He makes appearances on the Grand Ole Opry, and his work has been featured on the Today Show. He also hosts a podcast based on his writings.

Dietrich, known for his column "Sean of the South," is out on the road, bringing his unique perspectives, humor and heartfelt writing to crowds across the South.

Upcoming dates include:

Dec. 31 - Hayden, Ala.

Jan. 11 - Chattanooga, Tenn.

Jan. 18 - Andalusia, Ala.

Jan. 24 - Madison, Ga.

Feb. 14 - Mt. Airy, N.C.

For tickets and information, visit <https://seandietrich.com/events/>

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Snowbirds Gulf Coast prints four editions each winter: Holiday, January, February and Spring that are distributed regionally from Panama City Beach, Fla., west along the Florida panhandle to the Alabama Gulf Coast and Biloxi Visitor Center. We also push out pdf versions of the print edition through our e-newsletter (sign up online) and Facebook page: Snowbirds Gulf Coast ("Like" the page to receive information.) Find us at more than 300 condo lobbies and RV parks, plus of golf courses, restaurants, medical facilities and attractions from Panama City to the Alabama Gulf Coast.

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Condo lobbies throughout the coast	RV Park offices throughout the coast	Village Baptist Church, Destin
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Gulf Coast  
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Feb 15, 2025

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