



The Gray Hares gather for a day of nordic skiing near Crested Butte.

AN UNLIKELY RETIREMENT DESTINATION

Story by **Cara Guerrieri**
Photos courtesy

Gunnison Valley seniors have plenty to do,
and a great community in which to do it

On a stunningly blue March day, 15 senior citizens meet at the Nordic Center in Crested Butte for a cross country ski outing and potluck lunch.

With members ranging in age from their mid-50s to 80s, the group has been gathering to ski every Wednesday for the past 20 years. They call themselves the Gray Hares, “spelled like the rabbit because we are so fast,” they say, with a laugh.

On this particular Wednesday, or for that matter any day of the week in Gunnison County, the Gray Hares aren’t the only active seniors around. From organized hikes to swimming and pickle ball, bridge clubs, billiards, aerobics or balance classes, seniors in the valley are actively engaged in physical, social and cultural pursuits.

People who have retired in the last 10 years are redefining the concept of retirement, and in Gunnison County, retirement increasingly means “active.” While the area has long been a top world destination for the recreationally inclined, with baby-boomers entering retirement, that designation is translating into an ideal place for active seniors.

“The explosion in the number and variety of new activities targeted toward seniors has made Gunnison a much more attractive retirement

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community,” says Karin Stewart, coordinator of the Gunnison County Senior Resources office. “Also of importance is that our health care is excellent and we have a continuum of care options for seniors.”

Stewart credits much of the growing list of senior activities to Boomers & Beyond, a nonprofit organization which has, according to founding member Audrey Miller, “responded to the fact that Gunnison County has the fastest growing population of seniors in the state, all of whom need opportunities for socializing, travel, health care and active living.”

According to the latest census, the population aged 65 and over in Gunnison County increased 40 percent, while during the same 10-year period seniors across Colorado increased 30 percent. In the U.S. as a whole the increase was 15.3 percent.

To meet the growing local need for senior activities, the “Boomers” have become a lead organization for seniors in the area. A recent five month report shows that the Boomers sponsored 14 hikes, six dinner/concert evenings, three wellness programs and trips to Waunita Hot Springs, the Creede Repertory Theater and to Blue Mesa Lake. The Boomers also organized outings led by experts in wildflower identification, local geology and history. All this is in addition to helping sponsor several regular exercise classes, bridge and games clubs, a book club and billiards.

Pat Jagger, one of the coordinators of the Boomers, says “There are many single seniors who want to participate in activities but don’t want to go by themselves. One of our goals is to fill that gap and provide camaraderie for seniors.”

Meanwhile, in the north end of the valley, Charley Dumas, who retired here 13 years ago, says, “Very shortly after moving here, my wife Angie and I were connected with the Gray Hares and within weeks we had a bigger social network here than we ever did in Denver. We’ve got the Beauty Buttes, a senior women’s group that coordinates biweekly alpine skiing, summer hikes and weekly poker games. And, not to be outdone, a group of us men call ourselves the Butte Romeos and get together for skiing and fun.”

For music lovers, one can’t beat a university town. Western State Colorado University student and faculty recitals and concerts are free and open to the public. The six-week long Crested Butte Music festival features, according to their website, “opera, bluegrass, gypsy jazz, symphony and other world-class performances in very intimate and beautiful settings.” And there are free weekly concerts most days of the week in the summer, including “Alpenglow” in Crested Butte, “Live! From Mt. Crested Butte,” and in Gunnison there is “Fridays at 5” and “Sundays at 6.”

If seniors are interested in intellectual stimulation, Extended Studies courses through Western are offered at a senior discount, and there is a huge variety of course topics. A recent brochure offered classes titled, among others, Paint Your Dog’s Portrait, Colorado Birds of Prey, Introduction to Herbalism, Mandarin Chinese for Beginners, Fly Fishing and Mountain Biking.

“We’ve got it all,” says Gail Dusa, who retired to Gunnison with her husband Lee. “We didn’t want to live in cookie cutter homes to get all the amenities of a 55-plus community. Here, the community center has a gym, a pool, classes for every level of fitness and the Young at Heart lunches are a great way to meet both old-timers and newcomers. Plus, we have personal relationships with our physicians, there’s no traffic, no crowds, easy and free parking and a relaxed community where dressing up is hardly ever



Young and old congregate together during the annual Valentine’s Day Senior Sweetheart Ball. Here, Dotie Meldrum and Duane Baker take the dance floor.



Boomers and Beyond hosts many events for the active senior to enjoy.

required.”

As her neighbor Charlotte Haase says, “The Gunnison Valley is a bonanza for those retirees who like the outdoors, little crime and plenty of activities to choose from. I can be as busy as I want to be, and I feel secure, safe and satisfied with life here.”

Seniors not only come to this valley to partake in what it provides for them, but are a major volunteer force as well, giving back to the community they love. According to the Senior Resource Center, seniors volunteered 19,700 hours to nonprofits in the area, contributing generously with their expertise, talent and time.

Jim and Sue Oates, who retired to Gunnison from Chicago, have volunteered with the Adaptive Sports Center, Crested Butte Music Festival, 4-H, the hockey facility and the County Beautification Committee. Jim says, “We didn’t intend to do so much volunteer work, and we didn’t know a single

DID YOU KNOW...

Blue Mesa Reservoir is the largest body of water in the state. At 20 miles long, it has 96 miles of shoreline and can hold 940,800 acre feet of water.

[Source: nps.gov]

person when we got here. But over time, one friend and then another asked us to help and we've enjoyed it."

The Oates, who moved here in 2001, are year-round residents, and when asked the one question which often pops up about retiring to a place with a reputation for frigid temperatures — What about the cold? — Jim simply says, "You dress for it, and in winter we catch up on our reading, attend the Aspen Institute a couple of times and Sue likes to cross country ski."

Those seniors who purposely choose to stay in the Gunnison valley year-round appear to fall into two categories. Either they revel in the winter season by skiing, snowshoeing or through other outdoor pursuits — or, as a retired Gunnison rancher in her 80s put it, "We're 'pert near' too busy to notice the cold."

With this kind of attitude among seniors, plus bountiful recreational opportunities, prevalent sunshine and the infrastructure of two vibrant communities, members of the Boomers are exploring the goal of "making retirees in the Gunnison Valley the healthiest in the country." Considering the conclusions of some studies done on health and longevity, such a lofty ideal seems reachable here.

National Geographic author Dan Buettner travelled the world to discover the best strategies for living healthier longer, and in an Amazon interview about his book, "The Blue Zones," he says, "Staying young and living long is mostly a function of your environment ... and the good news is that to a great extent, we each have control over that environment. In the Blue Zones around the world, people live in places where walking is the main means of transportation, where the sun shines strong all year long so they get enough vitamin D, where they have established social norms that bring people together in supportive groups or clubs."

Being a supportive group was certainly demonstrated among the Gray Hares as they skied the groomed trails along Slate River toward Magic Meadow. They watched out for each other, helped out with gear and made sure the slowest skiers never alone. Many also spoke about how much they value the spirit of camaraderie during their get-togethers. Hailing from Alaska, Ireland, Texas and elsewhere, many expressed the sentiment that what brought and kept them here was not only some of the best skiing and hiking in the world, but "a friendly and fun community as well."

As they reached their destination, the Gray Hares pulled out contributions for a potluck lunch — iced shrimp, a variety of salads, fresh fruit, chocolate and wine. It was a celebration of sorts as they congratulated each other on a successful cross country ski season, but it was also a temporary farewell to those who take a hiatus from this mountain valley during the snow melt, though most of them return before the Fourth of July to enjoy the spectacular summers in the valley.

"It's hard for people to stay away," said Charley Dumas, "because whether retirees want to fish, ski, golf, eat out, listen to music, hike, bike or just enjoy a quiet life, our valley is a spectacular place." ■

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