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Breaking The Law Of Gravity

Paragliding In The Cascades Means Excitement And Exhilaration

BY LACEY PHILLABAUM

The worst part is standing at the summit and running downhill. The sun is shining and there is not a cloud in the sky, but the snow is slick as snot, and treacherous. More than scenic details, the breeze and cloud ceiling are the instrumentation by which Steve Roti flies his tandem paraglider. Facing west, he feels a gust flow upstream. Judging by the light movement of air against his face, he calls it two miles per hour.

Between eight and 12, the flight crew wouldn't need to run in order to inflate the wing for takeoff. At two, we have to run off the mountain. It's all right, Roti assures me; it'll only take 10 steps to get some lift, and there are at least 12 between us and the precipice.

Paragliders are risk-takers, thrill-seekers and adrenaline junkies, but they are surprisingly un-poetic about their chosen adventure sport. Sure, they acknowledge, paragliding is about as close to flying as humans have yet come. But taking a lunch break from their construction site, John Van Duzer, Bill Burks and the aptly titled Jeff Huey are more likely to talk nonchalantly than to wax lyrical about the concept of lift or the beauty of flight.

Roti has invited them over to his place for pizza and cookies and to tell me about gliding.

People have been paragliding only since the 1980s. Someone somewhere had the bright idea of using a skydiving parachute to launch off a high hill. Today the extreme sport is nearly as simple, requiring only a nylon "wing," a harness, a lot of warm clothes and some radio gear.

Paragliding is like hangliding, except without the rigid frame. It's a little like parasailing, like tourists do on the beaches in Mexico and Hawaii, except there's no tether to a boat. It's also like kayaking, the guys tell me, except that the medium is waves in the air, not the water.

On a simple flight, or "sled ride," a paraglider rides the current down, losing on average 1,000 feet in elevation every three minutes. In the right conditions, paragliders can also ride a thermal up.

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Like water, air currents have flow, backwaters, eddies and eddy lines. Even on a windless day, the air flows in all directions. Thermal uplift can be created by the shape of the land or changes in temperature (hot air rises). In California, paragliders ride the "ridge lift" of the Sierra Wave up to 22,000 feet as it curls over the crest of the range.

Paragliders read the landscape like a captain reads the sea, looking for elusive lift. They look for the aspect of a ridgeline that has warmed in the sun for hours. They look for cumulus clouds that sit like caps on columns of rising air. Red desert releases more heat than tan desert. Late-season cereal crops are dry and hot. Soaring birds ride rising air. "Hawks, eagles, swifts and swallows eat insects carried aloft in a thermal," Roti says.

The air above a moist area has no lift. Blacktop by itself doesn't work well, but a parking lot full of cars holding in dead air gives off some heat. Even a tractor working a field on a hot day can create a distinct thermal.

Wind kills thermals by mixing columns of air. A good thermal has distinct edges, and when the paraglider reaches it, it's like stepping onto a fast elevator. To balance gravity, the thermal has to rise at least 300 feet per minute (called zero lift). A good thermal might lift as fast as 1,000 feet per minute. Roti says he's been in thermals that were rising at 2,000 feet per minute, which is like taking a chairlift from the base of Mt. Bachelor to the summit in a minute and a half.

Jeff Huey set a state record for paragliding distance last summer when he rode thermal to thermal from Pine Mountain to Crane Hot Springs near Burns, a 111-mile trip, in six hours. He competes in international cross-country paragliding competitions and is ranked sixth in the United States. (Only about 150,000 people paraglide worldwide, and there are 4,500 pilots in the U.S.)

Huey is a tough and restless guy who turns away from the conversation and paces Roti's living room if he's neither the speaker nor the subject.

In a cross-country race, he says, the competitors traverse a predetermined course with waypoints marked by GPS coordinates. A big race can have hundreds of gliders sharing the same air space.

During his record-setting flight last summer, Huey launched from Pine Mountain at 6,000 feet and flew as high as 11,000. Glide ratio is nearly as important to a paraglider as lift. At sea level, where the air is thicker, there is more buoyancy. In the High Cascades, a typical glide ratio is eight feet forward for every foot down.

If anything, paraglider pilots are prone to understatement. Surfing the instructional material on the web produces these gems: "It has proven to be a very dangerous idea to teach yourself." "Low altitude acrobatics is a bad idea." Flying to Crane Hot Springs last summer, Huey writes, he had "an interesting encounter with a golden eagle," when the bird dove at his wing before riding the thermals with him.

Paragliders must brief themselves on all sorts of potentially adventurous scenarios in which they might find themselves; thus the manual, "Tree Rescue for Paragliding Pilots." A well-prepared pilot always carries a sign for hitchhiking in his or her pack as well. "The adventure starts after you land," Huey says, if you don't have a chase vehicle to track you down.

"I once landed in a prison farm. You can't tell from the air!" Roti

adds. "There's no sign saying 'prison farm,' at least not on the roof. But it ensured a ride out."

Instead of technical explanations of lift and glide, the men give simple summaries of the controls of a paraglider. The basic control is a set of "brakes" (later revealed as a string to the edge of the wing). Pulling the string curls up the edge of the wing and partially deflates it. "Pull right, go right; pull left, go left; pull both, fall out of the sky," Bill Burks offers.

Burks and vanDuzer specialize in the most complex type of paragliding, aerobatics (or "acro" for short in the lingo, but never acrobatics, emphatically, because that is for skinny girls in leotards.) Their repertoire of tricks includes loops, stalls and spins.

In a loop, the pilot soars up and over the wing. The difficulty is keeping the wing inflated when it is moving in a direction other than simply down and forward. The risk is that part of the wing will collapse.

"The thing works like a pendulum; you can get it swinging," Burks explains. "We hang 20 to 25 below the wing. If you keep your weight centered on it and you can keep it open, you can go to the side. You have to create enough energy to keep tension on the lines to go up and over it."

In addition to loops, stalls are the most spectacular trick the pilots do. "You can full-stall it where it wads up like a ball and you come falling out of the sky ... only as far as you want.

"A SAT is where you knock the wing onto its side, and you're moving backwards under your wing, and the wing is moving forward. The center of spin is between you and wing."

They say the biggest risk is that the pilot will get sucked into a cloud. (Paragliders are allowed by the FAA to fly under visual flight rules (VFR) only when navigational instruments are not required.)

There is one thing that the guys won't talk about. "We don't do crash stories," Huey says flatly.

But an hour's search on the Internet brings up enough accident footage to make anyone's stomach churn. Paragliders run into each other. Reserve parachutes get tangled in the wing. Wings collapse and the pilot plummets before he or she can re-inflate the wing and regain control. Worse yet, wings collapse and cocoon the pilot, stopping the wing from re-inflating and the reserve chute from being deployed.

What's the best time they ever had while flying? I ask.

"Haven't had it yet," Van Duzer shoots back.

"The next flight," Huey agrees.

After two weeks of para-waiting, there is finally a window when it might be possible to launch off Mt. Bachelor.

"There's a lot of ego in this sport," Roti tells me on the drive to the mountain. "Most people do not have enough confidence to take a piece of nylon to the top of a mountain and think they can fly off."

At Sunrise Lodge Bill Taylor has set up a windsock, meaning a stick with an orange streamer, in the landing field. We shuttle cars and

gear to the parking lot, and Roti hides a key on his car before we leave.

The key-on-the-car routine seems ominous, but he assures me there have been zero fatalities in Oregon from paragliding. (He should know. He's the accident committee chairperson for the American Hang-Gliding Association, and every accident report passes through his hands.) We each saddle ourselves with an oversized "plane in a backpack," and head toward the chairlift.

Roti is like an ambassador to the curious. Everyone who knows anything, and everyone who wants to know, wants to stop and chat about wings, weather, or a friend in Kalamazoo who paraglides.

At the summit, I am disconcerted to find there is no regular runway. Taylor and Roti just wing it, tromping around the summit and attracting curious looks, arguing a little, until they find a likely spot. They unfold their paragliders in a delicate reverse origami in one place and then drag all the gear two ridges over once the wind dies down.

"You're a trouper!" Roti encourages me while I drag my share.

Yeah, I think, a trouper, a paratrooper. "Para" for "half." Paraplegic, paragliding, half-baked.

The satiny nylon wing crinkles in the wind and sounds cheap. "They look flimsy when you look at them, but they are designed and tested to withstand up to eight Gs," Roti says. The "risers," or lines holding the wing to the harness, are also surprisingly thin, between one half and two millimeters--closer to dental floss. Roti says there is a Kevlar core inside the polypropylene sheath.

I don't dare set down my helmet for fear that it will roll off the top of the mountain.

Roti explains his commands: "Ready, go, run."

On "ready," I pose like an Olympic sprinter in the starting blocks. On "go," I run forward. When the wing inflates and holds me back, like the hand of God trying to keep me tethered to the Earth, I keep running.

On "run," I run for my life, with all my strength, not daring to look back as the wing rises overhead.

"Keep running, keep running," Roti encourages, as we lift for a second and then bump back into the ground.

And I am running and running, and my legs are pantomiming a marathon now, as the ground falls away and I am lifted straight up ... breathlessly, wordlessly into the air.

The ground falls away, and within the space of an exhale, I am soaring. I am thousands of feet in the air, free of gravity and the Earth. I am soaring along the spine of the Cascades with a perfect view on a perfect day towards the Three Sisters, and the very best part is how peaceful and natural and calm it all is, how very, very quiet.

The best part is the quiet.