



PHOTOGRAPHY: NATE SCALES

ON BEING A

bird

BY KIM FRANK KIRK

If you look up over the Wood River Valley during the last two weeks of August, you are sure to see hundreds of bright color flashes dotting the Sun Valley blue sky. The wings of competition paragliding pilots from all over the world will be soaring over mountaintops from Baldy to Stanley and beyond. Join *SVPN's* Kim Frank Kirk as she meets some of these adventurous pilots and throws caution to the wind to launch off of Bald Mountain on her first-ever flight.

ABOVE: Matt Beechinor flying in the Sawtooth Valley.



MIKE PFAU, FLY FAR IN IDAHO

Bringing the Paragliding World Cup and Open Distance National Championships to Sun Valley

Ever since he was a little boy growing up in the Wood River Valley, Mike Pfau watched paragliders launch off Baldy. "I was the kid who would take a sheet on top of the house and jump off," he says. In 2005, Mike met champion paragliding pilot, Nate Scales, while working construction. When Nate described the line he flew across the Smoky Mountains into the Boulders, across Galena and into the Sawtooth Valley, Mike was dumfounded. "I didn't know that type of travel was possible. To fly over all that terrain that I'd been skiing on all my life...unbelievable. A month later, I signed up to learn how to paraglide."

From launching with linens to organizing one of the biggest competition paragliding events in the world, Mike's enthusiasm and love of paragliding has taken off in all kinds of directions. "My wife would tell you I'm obsessed. There is no feeling like breaking the bound of terra firma—feeling the enormity of the sky. When you catapult yourself into the atmosphere, you feel that whole power. It's amazing."

A certified tandem pilot for Fly Sun Valley and the president of Sun Valley Paragliders, the local club whose membership boasts several current and former national champion pilots, Mike's involvement with paragliding is far-reaching. The local club pilots, through Fly Sun Valley, work with non-profit groups such as Wounded Warriors donating tandem flights, promoting the sport, and giving back to the community. Mike's organization, Fly Far In Idaho, is responsible for bringing both the 2nd annual Open Distance National Championships and the Paragliding World Cup to Sun Valley. For two weeks at the end of August, pilots from around the world will be launching off from Baldy, competing for both national and world titles and celebrating the colorful, accessible, and unique sport of paragliding.

SUN VALLEY PARAGLIDERS CLUB OR EVENT INFORMATION

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a first-timer paraglides

Tandem paragliding off the top of Bald Mountain was not exactly on my bucket list. Call me crazy, who wouldn't jump at the chance to float over the Wood River Valley with wild views of every mountain range as far as your eye can see. Isn't it everybody's dream to fly? Well, maybe not everyone. I consider myself sporty, an athlete even. But, not your typical adventure girl. I prefer grace to speed, Zen to adrenaline. Paragliding? I was pretty sure that lay outside of my personal thrill meter. But, when asked if I wanted to go, then write about it, I realized that I wasn't actually worried about hurting myself (tandem paragliding is very, very safe). And when Mike Pfau, Operator of Fly Far In Idaho and Tandem Pilot for Fly Sun Valley said, "It's the most fun you can have as a human," I thought: Why not?

At the base of River Run, a group of us meet, all flying with qualified pilots that work for Fly Sun Valley, the local concession for access to Bald Mountain and tandem rides. We pile into the truck: pilots and passengers (all shapes, ages, and sizes, visitors and locals) and drive the dirt switchbacks up the mountain. At the tippy top while pilots stand around checking wind and gear, we passengers quell our jitters by laughing and chatting. After the wind conditions prove just right, Mike makes the call. He secures my pack and we do a few simulated practice launches (which was like learning steps from a line dance). My pilot spreads out our gorgeous bright gold and

white paraglider. The launch is gentle and smooth. In seconds we lift off of the hill and soar out into the sky.

Am I scared of edges? Yes. Heights? Kind of. But, oddly, as we're flying I feel protected, even as I am incredibly exposed. There is a sensation of visceral clarity, of just how my small presence fits into this vast universe. The town below me is dwarfed by layer upon layer of mountain ranges. We are part of the sunset. I feel more like a bird than a person. Truly. And this sensation is awe-inspiring.

Paragliding is both exhilarating and peaceful, humbling, and exalting. And, it changed me somehow. Not in the ways I imagined it might: gifting me an overwhelming weightlessness or a jolting perspective on all my earthly concerns, but a quieter, more profound shift. Unlike an airplane or glider, unlike a parachute tethered to a boat, tandem paragliding is sans barrier between you and the atmosphere. You are the hawk circling and rising and playing on thermals. I look at the sky differently now, with an understanding of how a bird feels and with a lasting connection to the brightly colored wings of the paraglider pilots who fly over the valley.

GIVE IT A WHIRL + FLY SUN VALLEY TANDEM PARAGLIDING RIDES & LESSONS

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STENVE

PARAGLIDING WORLD CUP: AUGUST 18-25

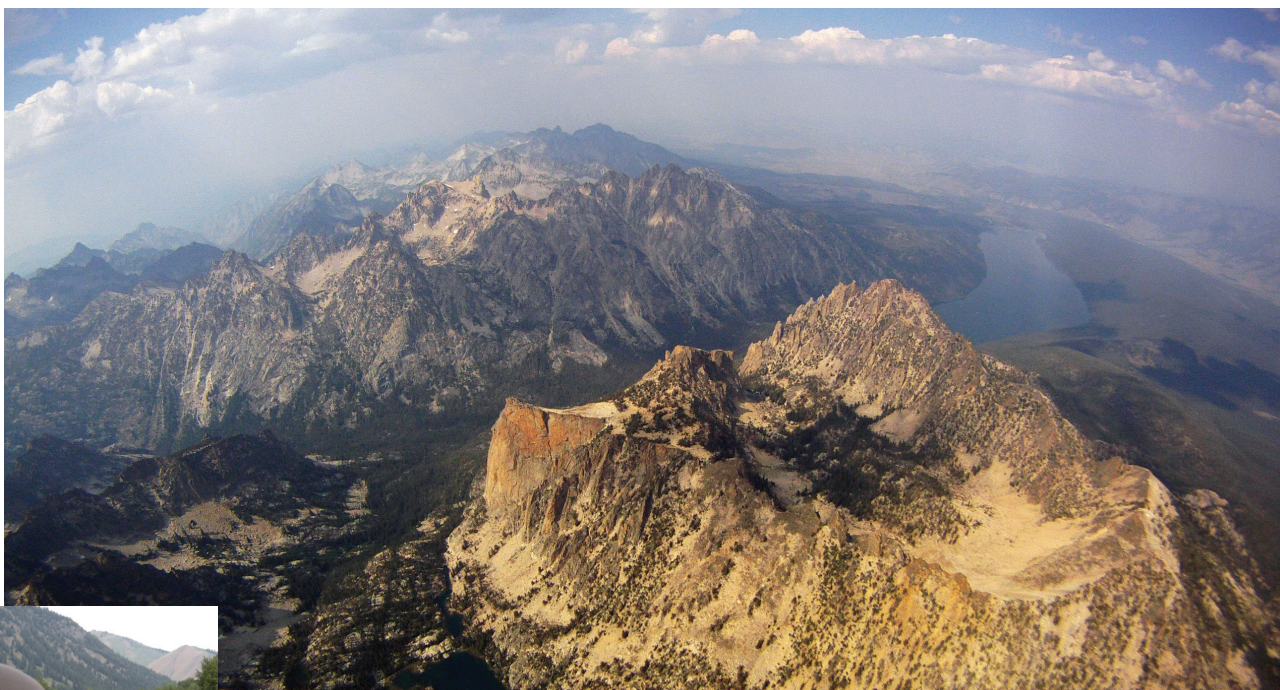
Don't miss this worldwide annual event! Only the second time in North America, the Paragliding World Cup is only open to the world's top pilots who qualify. Among the competitors are two Ketchum locals: Nate Scales and Matt Beechinor (see profile). **Rules of the Game:** The World Cup is a race-to-goal event. The committee assesses conditions for the day and sets a task. GPS is loaded for each competitor at race start. Pilots must tag each point until the finish. (For example: Baldy, Griffin Butte, Galena, Stanley.) This is a timed event.

OPEN DISTANCE NATIONAL CHAMPIONSHIPS: AUGUST 26-SEPTEMBER 2

Taking place immediately after the World Cup so pilots can compete in both events, the Open Distance Nationals test pilots' ability to fly the longest distance possible. The Task Committee assesses the conditions and sets a general direction with a series of controls and waypoints. There is no set finish and pilots must be on the ground by sunset.

PARAGLIDING WORLD CUP AWARD CEREMONIES: AUGUST 25TH 6PM

Come out and celebrate post-World Cup at the Ketchum Town Square. DJ and awards, followed by music from the Lower Broadford Boys and Old Death Whisperer. Food and beer by Power House Pub! **Sponsored by Hayden Beverage.**



PHOTOGRAPHY: MATT BEECHINOR



MATT BEECHINOR National Distance Record Breaker

On June 30, 2012, Ketchum paraglider Matt Beechinor launched off Baldy and flew 187.5 miles in 8.5 hours, landing in Anaconda, Montana breaking the national distance record for foot-launch cross-country paragliding. I caught up with Matt for the brief time his feet were planted on the ground before his next adventurous flight.

KFK: Tell me about the distance record you just broke.

MB: I didn't set out to break any records when I launched, I just wanted to fly some cross-country on my paraglider with friends. The conditions for the first few hours of the flight were very challenging; the thermals were small and hard to climb in. My buddies didn't manage to make it out of the Wood River Valley, landing just north of Ketchum. After crossing Trail Creek Pass I continued toward Borah Peak in the Lost River Range on my own. As the day progressed conditions improved; the thermals were getting stronger and I had a nice tailwind that helped me achieve good ground speeds, a factor that is important in big distance flights. It took me about six hours of flying headed northeast to cross the Pahsimeroi, Lemhi, and Beaverhead mountain ranges. Typically we use oxygen when flying at these altitudes, but my system had failed on launch and I flew without O2 all day. The views were incredible and the flying was intense. Cross-country flying consists of climbing as high as you can in thermals (columns of hot rising air) and

then using that height to glide to the next place you expect will produce more thermals—climb, glide, repeat. Once I crossed the continental divide I ran into a small problem. I have a 3-D relief map of Idaho hanging in my house that I've been studying for years to learn the area for my cross-country flights. Suddenly, I realized I'd just flown off my map. I was a little clueless about where I was. When I crossed the divide and flew into Montana it felt like flying into the unknown. I flew north through the Beaverhead Mountains for the remainder of the flight landing right beside Highway 90 just east of Anaconda, Montana. My flight lasted 8.5 hours. I reached altitudes close to 18,000 feet and set a new Idaho state distance record in the process, 187.5 miles. The previous state record was held by my good friend and Ketchum local, Nate Scales, at 148.5 miles. Later I learned that I broke another record, the longest foot-launched paraglider flight in the U.S. (previous record held by another great friend, Bill Belcourt, at 173.6 miles).

KFK: What motivates you to paraglide and compete?

ABOVE: A bird's-eye view from Matt Beechinor's flight across the Sawtooths. Redfish Lake is at the top right of the photo.

MB: I paraglide because I love flying and adventure. I compete because it gives me a chance to hang out with and test myself against the best pilots. Competition pilots are a fantastic group of odd characters, some of the best people in the world.

KFK: Can you tell me about an incredible moment flying and what made it so special?

MB: So many great memories. One of the more recent experiences was traveling to Ghana in West Africa this spring for a paragliding festival. After the event I traveled to a small village in the country of Togo. There were mud huts and no power or running water. I stayed there for a week and took kids from the village tandem flying with me. It was such a beautiful experience I was moved to tears. Sharing my passion with people who would never experience it otherwise is very special to me.

KFK: Dream flight?

MB: I've always wanted to fly the biggest mountains in the world. The Himalayas are calling my name.

KFK: How did you celebrate setting the cross-country flight records (Idaho and National)?

MB: By the time I hitchhiked to Butte and found a hotel for the night it was pretty late; I managed to find a pizza place that was just closing up for the night. My celebration was sitting on the side of the road in Butte drinking a few beers and eating cold pizza while fielding phone calls from all my flying buddies congratulating me.

It took seven hitched rides and 13 hours for Matt to get back to Ketchum. "Getting home is a big part of the adventure!"