



TAKING FLIGHT

Paragliding allows Earth-bound humans the chance to soar like eagles

By Kimberly Nicoletti

PHOTOGRAPHY BY BRENT BINGHAM • PHOTO MONTAGE BY BARBARA BINGHAM





High up Bellyache Ridge in Wolcott, paraglider pilots run and leap into the air.

For three decades, Greg Kelley has been carving turns in the sky.



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oftly drifting among cumulus clouds,

paragliders climb higher and higher, carving turns while seated below large, inflatable airbeds made of light nylon. Paragliding is the closest humans come to soaring freely like eagles — no engine, no bulky hang glider, no airplane to jump out of.

For more than three decades, Greg Kelley has dedicated — and even risked — his life for the sake of sailing through the air, unaided by fuel and unencumbered by heavy gear. When he moved to Colorado in 1990, he spent his days climbing rock or ice to reach mountain peaks, but he never considered taking flight: freefalling from an airplane or wrestling with a 60-pound hang glider didn't appeal to him. But in 1988, while skiing in Whistler, he watched a paraglider ski off a mountain and fly.

"I thought, 'this is my style,'" says Kelley, who is now an advanced tandem instructor at Vail Valley Paragliding. "I already climb mountains. Instead of climbing down, why don't I fly down?"

SKIMMING, FLYING AND CRASHING

In 1991, Kelley fell in love with paragliding, but the sport was still in its infancy. Skydivers and climbers in the French Alps were experimenting with ways to create parachutes they could launch off of small hills; increases in wingspan, nonporous fabric and shapes of the airfoil didn't begin to advance until the 1980s, which meant a lot of crashes, and fatalities. By 1986, paragliding was well established in Europe, but when Kelley began, less than 100 paraglider pilots existed in the United States.

"There was one guy in Boulder, two guys in Aspen, a few in Salt Lake City, and that was pretty

much it locally," Kelley says.

Without the radical new designs that emerged in the 1990s, Kelley's first flights were less than inspiring. He ran about 50 yards, rose in elevation no more than 20 feet, skimmed the surface about 100 feet and landed back on the ground, running.

"Performance-wise, paragliders weren't that good," he says. "I thought, 'Ugh, that was a lot of running and a lot less flying.' The equipment and technology were barebones. The seat was a tiny board with shoulder straps that were not comfortable — now they have harnesses, and it's like sitting on a seat, with back protection."

By 1992, better designs allowed paragliders to remain in the air longer — maybe 10 minutes — but they still didn't feel "solid" in the air and were prone to malfunction.

"The soft pulse of adrenaline as you're climbing is euphoric. It just gives you a tingling sensation inside as you're climbing with no motor. When you're up that high, you're in awe to think you're actually in this environment, because you don't have wings or an engine, yet you're climbing and flying like a bird in three-dimensions of air space."

"Testing was marginal," he says. "It was sometimes pretty scary being out there."

That summer, he hurt his back pretty bad, though nothing compared to the many pioneers who ended up with broken backs and legs.

"We were all trying to figure out how these things could fly and what their potential was," he says.

They were also learning about meteorology and best flight times: To borrow from river rafting's rating system, morning hours tend to be akin to riding class I and II (mild) whitewater, whereas between 11 a.m. and 5 p.m., conditions become variable — more like class V rapids. Evenings support smooth sailing, as colorful canopies drift into the airbrushed oranges, pinks and reds of the sunset.

SOARING HIGHER

When Kelley began paragliding, he was scared to death to rely on "a baggie filled with air" to keep him afloat. Walking to the edge of a cliff was pretty nerve-racking too. But he adjusted.

"I used to think flying high was scary," he says. "But the higher you go, the safer you are. In the air, you have three dimensions. You don't have a reference point you're standing on to give you that sensation of 'I can fall.' You have 360 degrees of space around you. Gliders feel super stable in the air."

Pilots climb and carve turns high in the open blue sky by studying the earth's terrain and cumulus clouds, which are created by thermals. High points in the terrain — from mountain peaks and ridges to homes, power lines and fence lines — trigger thermals, which paragliders use to climb in altitude. In addition, dirt fields, pavement and dark rock absorb the sun's heat, making the air warmer than the surrounding air and creating thermals. Pilots can literally reach the misty, cool clouds, flying

in and out of diffused fogs.

As they rise higher and higher, the earth flattens, and there's a feeling of actually sinking into the air. The pilot's body weight becomes the "engine," advancing the paraglider, which is designed with a slight, downward angle to carry it along.

"There has to be a downward angle to continue to fly," he says. "One of the best sensations is gliding toward the ground, then hitting a thermal — you feel a pull up in your seat and feel your weight. There's the whoosh of air as you angle up from the ground. ... You can get a rush from the awareness that you have this piece of nylon filled with air, with nothing but a harness and several strings about 1 mm thick, and you're open to the elements."

One of the most thrilling aspects of paragliding is the ability to fly higher than a Cessna can: Kelley recalls paragliding from Wolcott to Vail, riding thermals at 15,000 feet. When he reached Avon, he saw his friend's Cessna. Kelley climbed to 17,000 feet. His friend tried to reach that altitude but couldn't.

"His plane, even with an engine, couldn't get up to my altitude. Here I am, looking down at his plane. It's pretty interesting to think a paraglider can get higher than a plane," he says. "Vertically, you can go as high as the thermal goes — it could be 18,000 feet. The soft pulse of adrenaline as you're climbing is euphoric. It just gives you a tingling sensation inside as you're climbing with no motor. When you're up that high, you're in awe to think you're actually in this environment, because you don't have wings or an engine, yet you're climbing and flying like a bird in three-dimensions of air space."

And then there are the turns, which can pack so many G-forces, pilots can black out if they're not careful.

"The sensation of being able to carve a turn just like a bird creates a G-force in your body that's a

*Bart Garton, foreground,
and Greg Kelley float
above a golden world.*



great rush,” he says. “You can just keep going around and around like a bird. It’s a sensation of pulling in the seat — a carving sensation.”

COMPETITION

Kelley began competing in races in the mid-1990s, when only about 40 pilots worldwide showed up. Back then, a 20-mile flight was huge, compared to modern 60- to 100-mile mile flights, where pilots remain airborne anywhere from three to six hours. Early competitions required pilots to carry a camera and snap photos of each turn point from the air; no photo meant no points. Now, GPS digitally captures the coordinates, and up to 250 pilots compete.

Kelley, who has placed 13th in the USA, still competes not only to challenge himself,

but also to remain current on techniques and technology, which change rapidly. Even a rig a year or two old can significantly lag in terms of speed, ability to fly longer and turning capability.

“In the last 10 years, the aerodynamics and design have really evolved. The technology has gone through so much research and design. Safety wise, it’s gone through so much testing — it’s amazing how safe they feel,” he says.

CONNECTION

Though most people have flown in an airplane, they never experience free flight. Paragliding is like sitting in the seat of a plane without the surrounding cabin, legs dangling freely and face bare to the wind and sun.

“The freedom to be able to walk up a mountain and get in the air — it’s hard to explain,” he says.

“You can climb a mountain, but imagine climbing a mountain by paragliding — and to be able to do that in a three-dimensional airspace. It’s unspeakable.”

Paragliding connects Kelley to that larger, awe-inspiring, language-defying world.

“Because you’re flying in nature without a motor, you have to be involved with the daily cycles of the sunrise, as the day heats the ground, and the thermal cycles,” he says. “You become very intimate with how the Earth is breathing, with how the Earth is reacting to the sun and the meteorological responses. Essentially, you are at one with the mountain.”

A lack of humility and connection with nature’s rhythms could have devastating consequences; wise pilots act in harmony with the weather and the terrain. Trying to override nature can spell trouble.

“We have to take care of our limits — our limits in skill, the conditions, the technology and the equipment. It is the spirituality to adapt and yield. To me, it’s more of a spiritual thing because you have to be connected — you can’t be separated,” he says. “You become one with the conditions, one with the Earth, one with the cycles of nature, one with the sun rising, and one with rising to the clouds.” **vvm**

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