

# FLYING IN PARADISE

PARAGLIDING IN THE LAST FRONTIER

STORY AND PHOTOS BY TROY HENKELS

When I first came north, 25 years ago, I quickly realized that to explore in the Alaska wilderness meant not letting the elements hold you back. For many summers in Denali Park, rain and oftentimes snow squalls would keep less intrepid seasonal employees indoors. Despite the inclement weather, some of my most memorable experiences in the outdoors have been in some of the worst conditions imaginable. When I started spending winters in Alaska, staying inside just wasn't an option. Having grown up in the country, in northeast Iowa, I'd spent too much time out of doors during the cold months to imagine spending them inside. I've learned that, perhaps because



Lighting up the sky heading to the landing zone in Eagle River.



Mid-winter post flight warm up in the LZ (Landing Zone) on Mirror Lake in Chugiak.



A frigid February flight off Pepper Peak high above Eklutna Lake.



It's our nature, we Alaskans seem to head out of doors, not despite the weather, but because of the weather and what it has to offer. Deep snow and penetrating cold are oftentimes conditions to look forward to for many locals.

In 1992, I was working in Denali Park for my second summer season. There was a rumor that a guy was offering tandem flights on a hang glider by towing it behind a truck from the Nenana airstrip. Having always had wild dreams in my youth of flying like a bird, I decided to drive to Nenana with a couple of friends and see if we could get in the air. Indeed, there was a guy with a hang glider attached to a truck. That ten-minute flight was exhilarating, and I was hooked. After we landed the pilot started talking about a new sport called paragliding and pulled out a backpack full of fabric and a pile of strings. He explained you can hike up a mountain with this contraption and fly off. I was transfixed by the idea of free flight and what the mountains of Alaska offered someone who had a wing and was willing to hike.

With little money in those days, the idea was put on the back burner until the next year, when I could afford proper lessons and my first wing. Paragliding was a dream come true. The equipment was compact enough to fit in a backpack. I could hike up any mountain, lay out the wing, and run off the side of a slope and fly back to where I started hiking. This blossoming sport became one of my mainstays when I ventured into the Alaska wilderness and has remained so, for nearly 25 years.

In today's world, paragliding has become quite popular and the equipment has improved dramatically from the early 90s. Although Alaska isn't necessarily a hotspot for paragliding, due to the inclement weather, it is quite popular. The local Anchorage paragliding club, Arctic Airwalkers, boasts 50 active pilots. Many



Friends and wings flying off 27 Mile Ridge in Thompson Pass.





Bird's-eye view of Fire Lake in Eagle River, just before break up.

March in Thompson Pass.



Troy Henkels grew up on an apple orchard in rural northeast Iowa. Twenty-five years ago he walked away from a career in the corporate world to experience Alaska. Since that time he has worked, guided and led countless expeditions throughout Alaska and all over the world. He currently works on the Bering Sea Coast as a communications technician and calls Denali Park home. To read more about Troy's expeditions and to view more of his images visit: [www.TroyHenkels.com](http://www.TroyHenkels.com).





other places around the state also have pilots including Girdwood, Fairbanks, Juneau, Denali Park, Kenai, Seward, Homer, and even Nome!

*Launching with friends off of Flattop Mountain near Anchorage.*

The time of year that sees the most pilots flying is spring and early summer, when thermals are the most active and logging long cross-country flights is the name of the game. Just like eagles, pilots can hitch a ride with thermals to higher elevations and then hop from thermal to thermal, cover a lot of miles, and stay aloft for hours on end. One of my favorite flights is launching from Baldy, flying out to the Eagle River Nature Center, then turning around, flying back, and landing where I took off. There is a certain skill set that is involved to accomplish this, but for a non-motorized flight, it's pretty compelling. The Alaska state record for distance is held by Alaskan Wil Brown, who launched from Pepper Peak, near Eklutna Lake, landing 97.9 miles and 5 hours and 52 minutes later in Eureka. This was a stunning flight, to say the least.

Without a doubt the flying in Alaska can be quite memorable, but part of the fun is the friends you make along the way. And part of what makes Alaska and the people that choose to live here unique, is that the fun doesn't end when winter begins. There have been a growing number of paraglider pilots who congregate on weekends to hike and sometimes ski up snow covered peaks for the singular thrill of flying off. In many ways the flying in winter is much safer than any other time of year. Because of the cold, the air mass is denser and less turbulent and friendlier to fly in. With a lack of thermals and rising air, each flight ends up being a "sled ride," going from launch to the LZ (landing zone), in fairly short order. Flying over a winter wonderland is just as exhilarating, if not more so, than any other time of year. Even though the temperatures can often be a bit chilly, trying to stay warm is a small tradeoff for the stunning views and the opportunity to fly in this vast, beautiful wilderness that we call Alaska, and home. 🐻



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