

Freedom of flight

Central Oregon paragliders make Pine Mountain their home on summer evenings

By Mark Morical / *The Bulletin*

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MILLICAN —

Lighted by the fading orange sun, the desert seemed to stretch forever up to the mountains.

Wade Holmes and I were about 40 feet off the ground at Pine Mountain east of Bend, flying in tandem as we soared with the wind, hoping it would do us some favors.

I looked down again — and no longer were we a mere 40 feet in the air.

“We’re about 600 feet up now,” Holmes said calmly.

What??!!

I became a little queasy as we banked to our left, looking for some wind lift to make our way toward the summit. Another paraglider in the sky up and to our left waved.

Everything, and everybody, was so calm. All I could hear was the wind, and an occasional instruction from Holmes behind me.

It was all so simple. Lean left, and we would turn left. Lean right, we would turn right.

But Holmes was becoming frustrated. He was not getting the wind gusts he needed to fly us above the summit of Pine Mountain, the typical goal for an evening “glass-off.”

I hardly noticed. All I cared about was that I was 600 feet off the ground and still safe.

“It’s a face-your-fears type of sport,” said Redmond paraglider Tim Scarborough later that evening. “Every time you fly, it’s different. It may be the same sport, but it’s different.”

The Desert Air Riders, a group of about 30 Central Oregon paragliders, converge on Pine Mountain nearly every summer evening. I joined them last week to try a tandem flight with Holmes, the president of the club.

“Glass-off” refers to the buoyant evening wind on Pine Mountain,



Photos by Rob Kerr / The Bulletin

Paragliding pilot Wade Holmes and Bulletin reporter Mark Morical fly a tandem wing across the slopes of Pine Mountain near Millican last Wednesday.



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which often becomes constant and steady out of the northwest, allowing paragliders to soar up the mountain's northwest-facing ridge. Earlier in the daytime, thermal winds typically dominate the air, making for less-stable conditions — and allowing paragliders to fly as high as 16,000 feet, according to Holmes.

“There’s not a lot of places in the U.S. like it,” Holmes said of Pine Mountain, which is located about 30 miles southeast of Bend, a few miles south of Millican off U.S. Highway 20.

The wingspan on a paraglider is about 25 feet. (Tandem wings are much larger to support the extra weight.) The wing is made of ripstop nylon, and from it Kevlar lines extend down to clip into the harness, where the pilot controls the wing with brake toggles.

Pilots sit in a full-body harness, fitting their feet through stirrups.

Before the flight, Holmes took me through the process of launching, and then we hiked a ways up the steep ridge.

Strapped securely to my back and facing the same direction, he readied the wing for takeoff, waiting for just the right gust of wind.

“Pull!” he yelled.

I leaned forward hard, but the massive 44-foot wing yanked me onto my back.

We tried again, and this time I pushed forward with my feet off the rocky, sagebrush-covered mountain.

“Run!” commanded Holmes.

I charged with as much force as I could muster. Seconds later, my feet were still moving in midair. We were in flight, and I could stop running.

As we floated high in the cool evening air, Holmes pointed out the “giving tree,” a twisted juniper above which paragliders often get a strong gust of wind to lift them even higher.

Sure enough, once over the tree, we shot up to about 600 feet.

But the wind stayed light, and we dropped back to a lower elevation, unable to reach the summit.

Gliders have a sink rate of 200 feet per minute, Holmes explained. As long as paragliders have lift in excess of that, they can maintain elevation or climb.

But we were not getting the lift we needed to stay airborne, so Holmes made the wise decision to land after about 30 minutes in the air — ensuring we had enough altitude to reach our landing zone and ease safely back onto the ground.

The landing is much like the launch: you run.



Rob Kerr / The Bulletin

Pilot Tim Reynolds, 34, begins the post-flight packing in the setting summer sun after a day of paragliding at Pine Mountain last Wednesday near Millican.



Mark Holmes and Mark Morical lift off for their flight last Wednesday.

Paragliding at Pine Mountain

The Desert Air Riders are a group of about 30 paragliders who spend many summer evenings flying at Pine Mountain, about 30 miles east of Bend near Millican. The 20th annual Pine Mountain Fly-in is scheduled for Sept. 4-6. The purpose of the fly-in is to generate revenue for site insurance and site improvement.

For more information, visit www.desertairriders.org.

We came down smoothly into the landing zone of pea gravel, running across the ground. The force of the wing again put me on my back, and some lines tangled into a nearby picnic table, but we were safe.

We glanced up at about 15 paragliders and hang gliders who had reached the summit and were still soaring above the mountain.

"It's not a very buoyant night," Holmes observed. "Sometimes you can get a thousand feet above the summit. Now they're struggling just to stay above it."

Central Oregon is home to about 18 flyable sites for paragliders, according to Holmes. Other popular locations include Pine Ridge, near Redmond, and Mount Bachelor. A clear place to launch and land, and the right wind, are key elements of a suitable paragliding site.

While most Central Oregon paragliders prefer to "ridge soar" during the evening glass-offs, other forms of the sport are also popular. Some pilots like to go high and long, catching daytime thermals to rise thousands of feet in the air and travel more than 100 miles.

Others practice acrobatics, performing tricks and loops in the air.

The roots of paragliding can be traced to Europe in the mid-1980s. It gained momentum in the United States in the late '80s, about the same time paragliders discovered Pine Mountain. But it remains a sport with a niche following.

Holmes said that paragliding accidents do happen but added that fatalities are rare. Most accidents occur at launch or landing, he explained. It is possible for a paraglider to get caught between rising and falling air, which can crumple the nylon wing.

Paragliding is associated with hang gliding, though there are many differences between the two sports.

Hang gliders generally require stronger winds to fly and can reach speeds of up to 70 mph, while maximum speeds for paragliders are 25 to 30 mph.

The weight of a hang glider is about 75 pounds, and a hang glider can take as long as half an hour to assemble. A paraglider wing weighs about 15 pounds and can be ready to go in about five minutes.

"Paragliders you can put in a bag and pack around," Holmes said.

Tandem paragliders are more resilient to collapse and do not fly as high as a regular paraglider, according to Holmes.

Popular commercial tandem paragliding sites throughout the West include Sun Valley, Idaho; Jackson Hole, Wyo.; Torrey Pines, Calif.; and Salt Lake City.

Holmes, 30, began flying at Pine Mountain about five years ago. Most members of the Desert Air Riders are in their 40s or 50s and enjoy the atmosphere and camaraderie of paragliding. Afterward, they soak in the desert sunsets, sip on beer, and reflect on their flights.

"I like the tribal aspect," said paraglider Bill Walker, 53 and of Bend. "It's completely in the moment, that's what I really like about it. I plan on doing this until I can't walk up the hill."

Walker pointed west to a glorious High Desert sunset.

"And then there's this," he said. "You really develop a love for this place."

Mark Morical can be reached at 541-383-0318 or at mmorical@bendbulletin.com.