

January 15, 2006 | CLOUDY 28°


[current issue](#)   [valley life](#)   [photo galleries](#)   [services](#)
 [printer friendly](#)
 [email this story](#)
 [comments \(0\)](#)
 [subscribe](#)

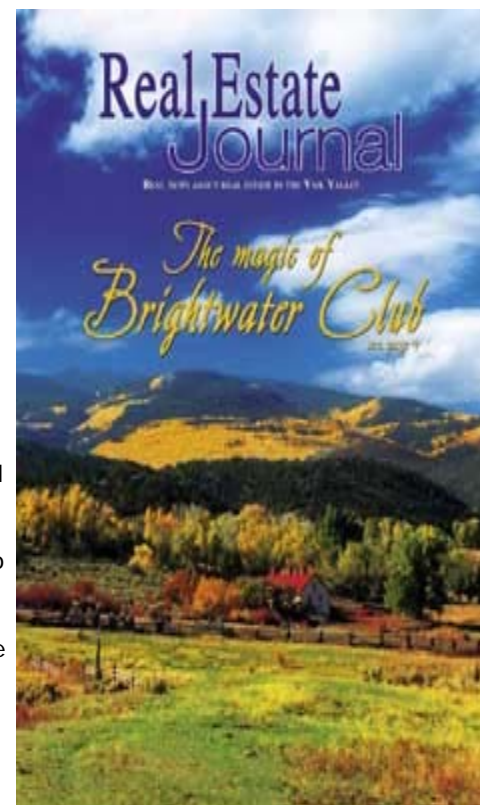

## Wing time

Solace, not adrenaline, define paragliding and hang gliding

**Tom Boyd**

September 5, 2003

Strapped into a paraglider and flying through the air at 12,000 feet the world below suddenly looks like an architect's miniature model, complete with little trees, parking lots, and moving cars. There is no airplane, no engine, no flight attendant, no peanuts, and the only thing between the pilot and the ground below is a pair of dangling boots. For Gary Walker and Greg Kelley this feeling, the feeling of flying, is almost an everyday experience. Although it can take months of training and up to \$6,000 to become a certified paraglider, Walker and Kelley have taken hundreds of people on "tandem" flights, which allow people of all ages and experience levels to strap into a two-seater paraglider and instantly make flying a reality. "As long as you're in shape and you have OK health, no serious medical conditions, you can fly," Walker says. "We had one lady who was 62 and she said she had been having dreams about flying her whole life. She couldn't believe it feels exactly how her dreams felt." Paragliders are common sights year-round in the airspace above Copper Mountain, where Summit Paragliding (Walker's company) hosts the Open Distance GPS Competition Sept. 6-7. Aspen Mountain is another popular launching spot, as are Kremmling, Telluride, Wolcott and anywhere else in Colorado that offers elevation and the appropriate wind exposure. One of the most popular launching spots in the state is at Lookout Mountain above Golden, where the colorful, rectangular-shaped



chutes proliferate on clear days. Breakthroughs in technology have added to the nascent popularity of the sport (the United States Hang Gliding Association in Colorado Springs reports that there are nearly 5,000 registered paragliders and hang gliders in the United States). Summit Paragliding's Walker and Vail Paragliding's Kelley (who guides flights out of Wolcott) say many people think of paragliding as an "extreme" sport that requires superior athletic ability and agility. They admit that people who push the boundaries of weather, acrobatics and turbulence are taking on great risks high in the sky. But appropriate weather means takeoff and landing should only require a bit of jogging, and flights should be smooth. "You can usually land a paraglider inside an area of 10 meters or less," Walker says. Once in the air, tandem passengers can sit back in a chair-shaped harness and enjoy the view - the paraglider pilot does all the flying. The concept of paragliding dates back to the 1960s, when European mountaineers began launching off the tops of peaks and cliffs with parachutes. Walker, Kelley, and pilot James Trujillo of Genesee say the sport has seen tremendous technological advances in the past 10 years, making it safer and more accessible to beginners. "A lot of people expect the high adrenaline," says Trujillo, "But you don't really get that. It's not like a roller coaster, it's more relaxed and meditative." Trujillo is also a hang glider pilot - which offers a different kind of non-motorized flying. Paragliders are lighter than hang gliders, easier to carry and easier to prepare for launch. Hang gliders are fixed-wing crafts generally made of carbon fiber cross bars and Kevlar-reinforced Dacron stretched over aluminum framing, and they tend to be more stable in turbulent conditions. But they also tend to be a bit more difficult to takeoff and land. Learning to fly For Trujillo the pursuit of flight has been a lifelong obsession. At 40 years old he has become a veteran of the game, taking sixth in the World Acrobatics Competition two years ago. But he wasn't always a champion of flight. When Trujillo was 7 years old he nailed a plank to a wooden crate and stood above a 200-foot precipice on his grandmother's ranch. With a tail-rudder and a custom-fit cockpit, Trujillo was hoping to match the engineering skills of the famous Wright brothers. But without an engine, Trujillo's flying machine was doomed to failure. It broke up and crashed on its initial flight, but fortunately Trujillo was not onboard. "I was a more level-headed kid than that," he says. And Trujillo, who has never suffered an injury while flying, says he maintains his level-headedness to this day. Trujillo's story of childhood dreaming is a common thread among the close-knit, foot-launched aviation community. Kelley's love of flying, for example, began on the ground, rock climbing. "I've always been fond of high places," he says. "It's partly the view, and it's partly the spiritual side of it. The sensation of flying, when you see a bird and feel what it's like to be a bird - it's outside of our normal environment and completely outside of what's normal." Birds, in fact, are a major part of flying lore and culture - and they're also navigational tools, helping pilots find thermals and wind currents. At Copper Mountain the pilots fly with red tail hawks. At Kremmling, Trujillo soared with a bald eagle through four separate thermal currents, following and watching the bird while it led and watched him. In Venezuela, Walker flew with nearly 50 vultures that boast white-tipped wings as long as 8-feet long. "They watch us, they check us out, and most of the time they just think we're another big bird up there," Walker says. Kelley, Walker and Trujillo all say they often dream of birds, and of flying. But now their dreams have become a reality. To learn more about paragliding, contact the U.S. Hang Gliding Association at (719) 632-8300 or go to [www.ushga.org](http://www.ushga.org).]]>