

Air Mail

Volume 1 Number 3

Utah Back Country Pilots

December 2001

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Board Member	Rob Hunter	(801) 583-5705
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Recorder	Dale Gardner	(435) 753-5504
Newsletter Editor	Brent Watson	(801) 298-3680

Web Address: www.UtahBackCountryPilots.org

Flight Plan (Upcoming Events)

The Utah Back Country Pilots now has a telephone hot line. The number is **(801) 583-0342**. Pilots are invited to call and find out the latest happenings in the Utah back country.

Our next fly-in is scheduled for January 18, 19, and 20. Plan on staying overnight Friday and Saturday in Mesquite, NV. We will fly to the Grand Gulch Mine on Saturday and spend the day exploring. Call the UBCP hotline for more details.

THERE WILL BE NO GENERAL MEETING IN DECEMBER. Our next general meeting will be held on January 30, 2002. This meeting will be our yearly planning meeting. We will discuss and plan activities for 2002.

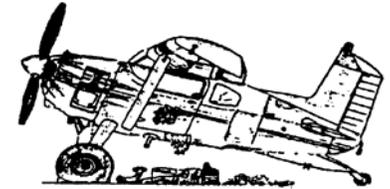
The board of directors met on November 14, 2001. During the meeting, Matt Haag, Rex Zollinger, and Brent Watson were appointed as members of the board. Additionally, Karl Spielman was given the title "Resource Access Officer". The board is looking for other members to serve. Our articles of incorporation call for an odd number of board members, and we now have six. If you would like to serve, contact one of the board members.

The UBCP has embarked upon the task of saving fifteen air strips. The list includes Hidden Splendor, Mexican Mountain, Happy Canyon, Simplot, Angel Point, and others. But this list is not yet complete. We would like to hear your suggestions. We are also looking for "committee chairmen" for these fifteen strips. Please volunteer to help save these valuable resources. Contact a member of the board to share your ideas.

Directions

-Steve Durtschi

We are proud of this edition of the UBCP newsletter and we hope you enjoy it. We have spent a lot of time discussing what



our newsletter should include and ways that we can make it better. We feel that the newsletter should support the goals of our organization, which are: first, safety in the back country; second, championing and protecting Utah's remote recreational landing strips; and third, promoting a "leave no trace" discipline when visiting these sensitive lands. We screen all material received for submission to the newsletter and insure that it meets one or more of these goals. Brent Watson does a great job of cleaning it all up and making it presentable and we are indebted to him. If you have some suggestions as to how we can yet improve the newsletter, please give us a call.

As this edition goes in the mail, the days are shorter and the nights colder. I find myself clinging to the memories of the summer and anxiously anticipating December 20th when the days start getting longer. Aviation enjoyed a great season in the back country. I received many reports from pilots who ventured to Idaho for the first time. Some participated in the Idaho Mountain Flying Seminars and others took a competent instructor along. We were able to meet up with out of state friends at Mexican Mountain and got reports of others who visited the Utah back country. The season was long and the fires did not materialize as many expected despite the dry conditions. There were no serious back country accidents that I am aware of this year and all of the trip reports that I heard were positive. My only regret is that I was not instrumental in getting any wheel pants removed and put on the shelf this year. (I have found personal satisfaction in the past in being present when someone finally makes the "break", deciding to land in the dirt and removing their wheel pants. If you are considering taking yours off, invite me over so I can feel like I was a part of it!)

Our fly-in at Mineral Canyon was the perfect culmination of this year's flying season. If you were not there, I'm sure Dale Gardner's report in this issue will make you wish you were. We just happened on a perfect weekend with pleasant temperatures and light winds. Laurie Tyler took me for a ride in her Husky early that Saturday morning. The runway that so

many people had worked on a few weeks before was just coming into the sunshine and the Windgate Cliff was still in the night time shadow as we departed. The visibility must have been 200 miles as we climbed above the rim. Far below, a few folks were standing around trying to stir the coals to life from the night before, and a tiny wisp of smoke went straight up. I saw them all look up as Laurie tightened the turn overhead and marveled how beautiful the entire scene was (and how tight the Husky could turn). The air was so still we had to wait for a while for the dust to clear from the take off before we could take any photos.

I am looking forward to next year. In the mean time, there's Baja, and a fine little strip called the Grand Gulch in Arizona... I suppose we'll get through the winter.

Hidden Battles at Hidden Splendor

- Rob Hunter

As we reported in our last newsletter, the BLM granted the right-of-way to the Hidden Splendor Airstrip. This right-of-way would have allowed us to put up a wind sock, do maintenance on the airstrip, establish a parking area and put up a sign warning hikers and motorists of the active airstrip. Unfortunately SUWA (Southern Utah Wilderness Alliance) has appealed that decision and asked for a "stay" or injunction that would immediately limit use of the airstrip. They have asked for the stay based on the "likelihood of immediate and irreparable harm" and the "devastating impacts to the area's wildlife." We have not seen the reasons why they think this will occur.

Utah Back Country Pilots with the help of attorney Paul Turcke, the Blue Ribbon Coalition, and members Karl Spielman and Rob Hunter have filed 21 pages of reasons and many photos in opposition to SUWA's "petition for stay". The case is now in front of the Interior Board of Land Appeals (IBLA). UBCP also applied for "intervener" status in the case and expects to be able to present further arguments and evidence in support of our case to the IBLA. We will continue to fight for the right to use this and other back country airstrips and to maintain them in a safe condition.

Brush Pilot Report

-Hal Hilburn

West of Sevier Lake is an uncharted dry lake generally known as IBEX Hardpan, a flat expanse of white. You can set the tires down in any direction, but knowing the wind direction may be tricky. If you see whitecap waves, wheel landings are not advised. Furthermore, if it appears wet you are probably attempting a landing on Lake Sevier, and this area is for air boats and swamp buggies. Yet the featureless white surface is, like still water, difficult to judge. This site offers a very good practice area. This is the least challenging, during the dry season, of the sites listed herein. Mark your charts or set your GPS to N 38 52.94 W 113 26.53.

Southwest of St George lies Pakoon, a strip 3500± X 75± in good condition except for transient tumbleweeds. The strip should be named Boondoggle to honor the BLM building the site as a firefighting base. After years of drilling dry holes the choice was labeled "impractical". The BLM did leave behind a port-a-potty, (a monument), the only one in that section of desert. The only other benefit is it offers a good site to practice off field landing, prior to moving on to more challenging ones. Mark your charts or set your GPS to N 36 23.030 W 113 57.763.

North of SGU by 35NM± lies Beryl Junction, the only strip we mention that is charted. Being within easy walking to food and a phone makes it a good place to practice. Note the power line crossing at the south end, a requirement for a suitable charted FAA approved landing site with a 50 foot obstacle. Additionally there are several roads and suitable landing sites to practice on in the long dry area just to the north and west known as the Lund area. Mark your charts or set your GPS to N37 42.84 W 113 38.5.



Emily Airstrip



An old Yuke truck at the Grand Gulch Mine

Again south of St. George lies the Grand Gulch Mine, the jewel of back country piloting. There is just too much there

for this article to fairly cover. Please visit the Aug/Sept '01 issue of SW Aviator for a fine article on flying to the mine. It is available on line at www.swaviator.com. The mine is a short walk from the cross strips at N 36 19.379, W 113 47.197

Abutting notorious Area 51, Groom Lake, and Alien Depot is the tiny town of Rachel, NV. The local attraction is the Alien Inn which offers food, drink, gifts, and even motel rooms. A crusty old prospector will be happy to lead a safari to Peak-a-Boo Peak which is the local high ground from which to spy on the happenings in the restricted area. And the locals will share hours of stories and rumors about the extraterrestrial visitors. Check out the following web site for information: www.ufomind.com/area51/place/rachel. Picking your landing site is a challenge. You can choose from several outlying dirt roads, but most planes choose to use the hard surface strip, the Extraterrestrial Hwy 375, then taxi to the tie down area (parking lot) next to ground vehicles also lost in the desert. For this option call the Inn, (775) 729-2515. They will coordinate and hoist a wind flag. These landing sites can be very difficult if you have not done your homework. A power line and/or a sign post along the road will interfere with an otherwise "perfectly good landing". If you are not experienced in landing on roads, practice closer to home before visiting this desert outpost. Mark your charts, or set your GPS to N 37 38.581, W 115 44.319. Just one added note: DO NOT STRAY INTO THE RESTRICTED AREA AS THEY WILL USE YOUR AIRCRAFT AND OCCUPANTS FOR TARGET PRACTICE!



Baker, Nevada

Another great destination, but the most difficult landing strip is Baker, NV. Nearby are the Lehman Caves, one of the treasures in the Great Basin National Park. Call (775) 234-7270 for information. The "strip" is 12 to maybe 20 feet wide. The local aviator routinely lands his super cub there, but he is well practiced and it is a Super Cub. At the north end you will find a tiny tie down area. Hint; look next to the wind destroyed hanger. Use your own ropes, as ramp services are limited. A short walk north along the highway leads you to the community hub, the local bar. Take on food, drink and a browse around town. Drop a hint for a much needed free ride to the caves. Plan on at least two hours to explore the caves. Summer visits require reservations. Afternoon departure may involve a severe cross wind requiring better than average skills. An alternative plan – call ahead to arrange overnight

accommodations, plus local knowledge on other nearby landing sites. The local hub phone is (775) 234-7302. Check out the Park's web site: <http://www.nps.gov/grba> Mark your charts or set your GPS to N 39 00.28 W114 07.77.

All of these adventure strips require skills advanced well beyond public fields with hard surfaces. Clear approaches and make wide clearances. If you feel uncomfortable on narrow dirt, get some dual with an instructor familiar with back country strips, and use the proper equipment. Practicing short field landings at your local field is not sufficient. Back country flying is not for the inexperienced pilot. Remember the back country experience does not include wind socks nor guarantee a smooth strip without cows or cow debris. Always make at least one low pass, checking for condition, wildlife, wind, lengths, and whatever you need to know for final preparation. Consider too, telling the FSS who you are, where you are going and how long you expect to stay there. It's free insurance, and for heaven's sake, close your flight plan when you are down and clear. Some suggest taking a rudimentary survival kit. Certainly water is always advised, or better yet, you might want to fly with a friend in a second plane. It is good insurance, plus you will have someone to attest to your fine back country skills, including your landings. One might think the reward is not worth the risk. For some that is true. For others the experience of quiet, remote scenes, challenges conquered, and exploration is worth all the extra training.

Report from the Back Country

- Rob Hunter

I have been fortunate enough to make several trips to Utah's backcountry airstrips in the past month. Each time the air has been smooth and the weather beautiful and sunny. It truly is a great time of year to fly in Utah. Below are reports on the strips I visited and a few reports from other members. We would like this to be a regular section of the newsletter with reports from our members. If you've been to one of Utah's back country airstrips recently give us a call or send an e-mail (ubcp-rob@home.com) and we'll put your report in the next newsletter so all of our members can benefit. Please include the date you visited, runway condition and any other information that might be helpful to pilots.

Mexican Mountain (10/27/01) is in good shape. Most of the tall succulent weeds that were there have dried up and blown away. Karl Spielman and I put up the new UBCP/BLM sign at the windsock and it looks great! Thanks to Forrest Burnett for having the signs made!

PR Springs (11/3/01) might still be useable to Dennis Bleazard (who took me there a year ago in his Super Cub) but isn't usable for me. It has a few trees that look like they would interfere with my wings and two large, rutted, airplane damaging depressions where water collects. It would not be hard to make this airstrip useable again.

Hidden Splendor (10/24/01) is in excellent shape but watch for obstacles on the runway such as rock fire-rings.

Sand Wash (10/30/01) is in great shape for a backcountry airstrip. The windsock is no longer functional and needs to be replaced. Any volunteers?

Bandana Ranch (10/30/01) is in good shape but the dry grass is about a foot high. I only taxied about halfway up the strip to the north before turning around and taking off. The grass on the northern half of this long airstrip looked longer.

Mineral Canyon (10/13/01) is in the best shape it's ever been in. The fly-in was great!

Angel Point (11/04/01) Charles Heywood landed and hiked down into No-man's Canyon. He didn't report any problems with the runway.

Dolores Point (10/26/01) Doug Isner reported that the strip was in good condition and that Wally was going to drag the strip that afternoon to make it even better.

Happy Canyon (11/11/01) Steve Durtschi reports that the airstrip is in good shape and essentially unchanged from last year. It appears to be getting a lot of use, which is keeping the grass at bay. The windsock works and is in good condition.

Dirty Devil (11/11/01) Steve also reports flying over the Dirty Devil airstrip and noting that the strip seems to have been getting a lot of use, but that the windsock is in tatters. Steve has a few extra windsocks and two extra windsock poles if any one wants to go replace the sock at Dirty Devil or put one up somewhere else.

Expedition to the Dirty Devil

- Brent Watson

March 11, 2000. It is a beautiful day today, the kind of day when flying is the order of the day without question. Cool, clear days in March are ideal for going into the Utah back country, and today is no exception. Today we will visit the Happy Canyon airstrip and look at some others in the area.

I have read about the strip called the Dirty Devil and it holds a fair amount of intrigue for me. The thought of isolation and the descriptions I have read in back issues of the UBCP newsletter make this place almost mystical. My 182 has 800X6 tires and a 300 horsepower engine, but is it possible for me to land there and get out again? Others have been there but with aircraft built more for the back country.

Two aircraft depart Skypark at 9:00 am. I am alone in my plane, Keith Painter is riding along with Rex Zollinger in 22Q. We arrive at the Dirty Devil River and begin searching for the airstrip. We fly south almost until we reach Hite, and see no sign of the strip. Turning north again I fly over Happy Canyon and see the strip at Sam's Mesa also. Rex remains over the river flying north. As I pass over Sam's Mesa I hear

Rex on the radio. He has found the strip and gives me instructions to get there.



The Dirty Devil Strip

Airphoto, Jim Wark

Finally I see it. As is always the case, I wonder how I missed it on the first pass. Rex is not eager to land. He has heard it is less than 1000 feet long. I fly over the strip at 1000 feet AGL and 80 mph. I make a rough approximation of the length by timing how long it takes for my wing strut to go from one end to the other. My rough guess indicates close to 1800 feet. This should be easy. I fly over one more time carefully looking for obstructions and the condition of the strip. I see other tricycle gear tracks on the strip as well as the conventional tracks.

Everything looks good and I make a left downwind to land on 35. On final at 70 mph and full flaps things still look good. I touch down within 50 feet of the end and have no problem stopping before I am halfway down the runway. I add a lot of power to taxi to the end and then off to the west side. I also radio Rex that I have landed safely, and that there was no problem stopping. Moments later he arrives from the same approach and taxis up the north end and shuts down.

What a beautiful day it has turned out to be! The temperature is in the mid 70's, and it is a bluebird day. The scenery is gorgeous with red rock cliffs on the east and west. The Dirty Devil River meanders around the strip about 200 feet below us. As we walk the strip it becomes obvious why we stopped so easily. It is about six to eight inches of loose sand. Even the area around is loose sandy soil. We will need to start right at the north (uphill) end and use every bit of the soft field training we have.

Rex and Keith get into 22Q and start up. The hot IO520 balks, but comes to life. I get buckled in but elect to not start up until Rex has departed to keep the dust out of my aircraft. I watch as Rex starts his takeoff roll as his nose gear comes off the ground six or eight inches. His plane lifts off the soft sand near the end of the runway. As I start up he calls on the radio and exclaims that he is glad it is not any warmer. His stall warning is going off in the background as he slowly gains more airspeed.

I apply power to taxi to the north end of the runway, but 0BW will not move. I apply still more power, but it takes full power to break loose of the sand and brush where I sit. Finally I

arrive at the end and once more firewall the throttle. My technique for soft field is to just take the weight off the nose wheel and let the plane fly off as I gain airspeed. The airspeed indicator comes to life, but does not move up like I am used to. The end is coming up fast, but OBW breaks loose about 80% of the way down the runway. The stall warning chirps, so I lower the nose slightly to build more airspeed. Rex is now overhead and remarks that I got off sooner than he did. Now all 300 horses are doing what I am more used to. I climb out of the canyon and turn north, back towards Skypark. I too, am glad the day is not any hotter.

What would I change about this experience? Several things come to mind. First is to pay more attention to reports of others who have used the airstrip. I thought before I landed that the length was much longer than it really is. Next time I will make more careful estimates of the length before landing using a stop watch. I underestimated the effect of the softness of the runway. Moving my airplane seemed like trying to move through wet concrete. The density altitude that day was around 6000 feet. My aircraft takes 800 feet at that altitude to get off the ground on pavement. I have talked to many people about the correct soft, short field technique. I feel confident that raising the nose wheel off the ground is the wrong thing to do. Slight back pressure to get the weight off the nose wheel is the proper thing to do. Having two aircraft there was definitely the right thing to do. It's always good to have another person there to help if you get into trouble.

Dirty Devil! I love that place. Can I get in and out again? YES, but I'll be well practiced and it will be in the 60's when I visit again.

The Dirty Devil airstrip is located at 38 10.350 N, 110 26.681 W. It measures 1300 X 30 and is oriented 17-35. There is a windsock near the north end on the west side of the runway. It is VERY soft.

Instructor or Student?

- Matt Haag

A few weeks ago my fiancé, Holly Spencer, and I had the opportunity to exercise our privileges as Flight Instructors in a different way than the norm. With the First Annual UBCP Mineral Canyon Fly-In occurring during a period of time when our normal flying privileges had been cramped (at best), we decided to team up with two other members of the UBCP and give flight instruction as was required to operate under VFR in and out of the Enhanced Class Bravo airspace. Although flight instruction was required in and around the ECB area, once we were east of the Wasatch ridgeline the lesson was concluded.

I grew up in a general aviation family. Back country flying was a part of growing up, but mostly in my home state of Arizona. The Utah and Idaho back country is a new and exhilarating experience for Holly and me. So that day, in exercising our privileges as CFIs, we were actually becoming students. And because we had never flown to Mineral Canyon

before, we now had the opportunity to see the approach, landing, takeoff and departure done right, by some fellows who've been doing it for a while. Those fellows are by nature two of the most humble and even self-denigrating characters I have flown with. So in order to try to maintain their pleasant demeanor and enable them to continue to fit their heads into the cockpit, I will continue my story with some degree of anonymity.

John and I, with Jean (John's wife) in the aft seat, arrived first in the Mineral Canyon area with Joe and Holly not far behind. As the airstrip came into view, we could see two airplanes already parked, but no sign of movement that early in the morning. We orbited the field above the canyon rim assessing wind and field conditions on the surface. As we completed our second orbit and entered the down wind, John began to configure the airplane. He slowed to his approach speed and set the power to achieve a stabilized descent at about 500 feet per minute. As we approached the rim of the canyon on the downwind, he selected flaps 10° and re-trimmed the airplane to relieve control pressures. Prior to turning base, John selected flaps 20° and retrimmed to continue a stabilized approach. Prior to turning final, he verbalized a form of the "GUMPS checklist", ensuring we were configured for go-around. After turning final, John selected flaps 30° and again, retrimmed. The final at Mineral Canyon consists of a slight S-turn maneuver following the canyon with the airstrip coming into view at about 1/2 mile from the approach end. As the field came into view, John lined up on the runway centerline, and I was able to visualize his "aim point" – a patch of dirt just short of the runway that stayed in the exact same "spot" through the windshield until the flare. At about 1/2 mile final and a gliding descent to the runway assured, John selected flaps 40° and slowly and smoothly reduced power to the idle stop as we rounded out in the flare. The result was a textbook approach to a textbook landing, touchdown made in 3-point (tail-dragger) stance, and a landing roll of ~300-400 feet without brakes.

As instructors, we often preach about the "stabilized approach" to landing, but hardly ever get to see it executed well. The notable things that made the approach and landing so successful began before we even had Mineral Canyon in sight. It began with a gradual descent and small reductions in power to avoid shock-cooling the big Continental up front. During the orbit of the field, a deliberate and meaningful assessment of the field and wind conditions took place. Although the conditions were ideal in this case (calm winds and an excellent runway environment), we made two orbits assuring that the assessment and ensuing decision were not rushed or taken lightly.

John knows his airplane well. He used power settings and configurations that allowed for a smooth let-down without any abrupt power changes or pitch oscillations. Flaps were used to bleed energy on the descent without increasing airspeed, but were not used as a "last ditch effort" to dive the airplane at the touchdown zone. Full flaps were used only when we had the field made without adding power, avoiding the backside of the

power curve (a.k.a. the “region of reverse command”) without a landing surface beneath us.

In summary, there are a few points we can all remember to help ensure success when operating in the backcountry:

- Never be afraid to observe an approach or departure with someone who’s been there, done that.
- Don’t rush your approach. Observe the conditions carefully and don’t be in such a hurry as to forget a checklist – whether you read it or use a mnemonic checklist like GUMP, CGUMP, CGUMPS; whatever!
- Airspeed and attitude control. Practice so that you can nail your approach speeds, and transition to your short field approach speed and configuration over the threshold with minimal pitch and power fluctuations.
- Go-Around (terrain permitting) is always an option. Though if you go, give it all the power, get your airplane configured properly, and observe V_x and V_y as appropriate. Those speeds really do work!

As I re-read this, I realize that I am still in jeopardy of embarrassing somebody. There are a few readers out there who can figure out who “John, Jean and Joe” are. However, let’s realize that the real intent of this little article is to emphasize a few things that will help us enjoy our back country strips a little more, and keep us safe while doing so. So sit back, John, relax at a job well done, and accept a few kudos from a CFI who recognizes that we must never stop learning from others.

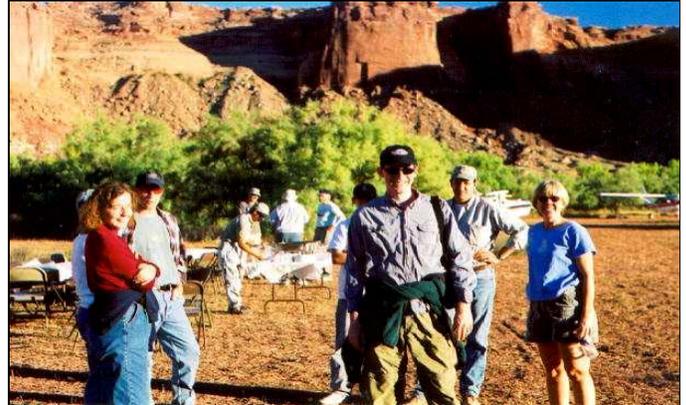
Footnote: I made my first approach and landing at Mineral Canyon less than a week later. I won’t boast about the landing, but the approach was made with confidence. My brother video taped the whole affair, so now Rob Hunter and I both have footage of the approach into this beautiful strip for anyone who’s interested.

Mineral Canyon Fly-in Report

- Dale Gardner

The 1st Annual Utah Backcountry Pilots’ Association Fly-in was held October 12-14 at the Mineral Canyon airstrip on the banks of the Green River. By the time dinner was served, 24 people and 12 airplanes had arrived for a great turnout. Bill Meine, who arrived Friday evening, was greeted by the rest of the gang Saturday morning. A few stragglers continued to arrive throughout the day and the fashionably late crowd consisted of one red and white Husky and a Cessna 207, however we won’t mention any names at this time. What a good turnout! We had airplanes from as far as Denver, Phoenix, and Battle Mountain, Nevada. With flight restrictions still active, and enhanced class B airspaces we were well aware that some folks could not make it, and the strong winds up north may have turned at least one airplane back home.

I left Logan Saturday morning and touched down around 11 am. As I climbed out of the plane I was greeted by many smiling faces but I suspect none with a smile as big as mine. What a spectacular place and unique opportunity to enjoy southern Utah. I had just been to Mineral Canyon several weeks before working with the clean up crew, but we had driven in, an hour drive from Moab on a long and dusty road, and a trip that had not properly prepared me for the beauty and excitement of flying into Mineral Canyon.



An enjoyable afternoon at Mineral Canyon

After brief introductions and meeting some new faces I asked about the activities for the rest of the day. Not having done much flying in this part of the state, I opted for an afternoon aerial tour and quickly gathered advice from the more experienced. I departed down river to the confluence of the Green and the Colorado with a lunch stop planned at Needles Outpost. I continued down the Colorado eventually crossing north to pickup Happy Canyon, Dirty Devil, Angel Point, Hanksville, Hidden Splendor; then up the San Rafael Swell, a fuel stop in Green River, and back to Mineral Canyon. I certainly could never describe on paper the beauty seen during that afternoon of flying.

While I was out flying, others spent the day around the Mineral Canyon airstrip hiking the nearby hillsides and finding interesting rocks, caves, and old mining junk. I heard that several desert big horn sheep were spotted on the rock hillside just above the airstrip. Others were just as happy to rest under the shade of the wing, sip a cool drink and talk of airplanes, good times and of places to fly and enjoy.

As the sun began to sink below the west rim of the canyon, Fat City Smokehouse showed up with fresh hot ribs, roast beast, chicken, rice, beans, salad, and peach cobbler to chase it all down. Wow – where did all the ribs go? The evening was complete after a relaxing sit by a big fire and a view of the incredible starlit sky above the canyon walls.

On Sunday morning the hot coals from the fire were stoked once again to help take the bite out of the frosty air. Everyone soon gathered around the campfire to prepare breakfast, test out the latest camp stoves, and prepare hot aqueous extracts of *Coffea arabica* beans. As I choked down my instant oatmeal, I

secretly eyed the breakfast burritos, neatly wrapped in aluminum foil and left in hot coals to warm, as their unsuspecting rightful owners went for a morning stroll. They should have been surprised and amazed at their transformation to dry oatmeal on their return – there were just too many uncooperative witnesses to complete the switch.

The sun finally reached above the canyon walls and melted the frost from the windscreen. It was time to head north. The first annual UBCP fly in was a complete success! Thanks to all those help put it together. The airstrip was in great condition. Matt Pottenger, your efforts in organizing the clean up were appreciated. Kent Bond, the food and dinner worked out great. For all those who where not able to make it we hope to see you next time, and for all those who were able to join in the fun thanks for coming (Rob Hunter, Holly Spencer, Matt Haag, Bill Meine, Wilhelm Hohls, Laurie Tyler, Jim Dorward, Jim Akers, Rex Zollinger, Andrew Sidwell, Jack Lowrey, Calvin Lowrey, Dale Gardner, Nick Royon, LaVar Wells, Jessie Strassburg, Tom Belchak, Corey Bagley, Cal Brubaker, Carla Harless, Rick Harless, Steve Harless, Cathy Durtschi and Steve Durtschi).

Editor's Note:

The following two copyrighted stories appeared in the Ogden Standard Examiner on Thursday, November 8, 2001. They are re-printed here, including the photographs, by permission.

Above the Back of Beyond

Jim Wright

Standard Examiner Staff Writer



Brent Watson, on his way to Southern Utah, flies his Cessna 182 past the backside of Mount Timpanogos. Photo by ROBERT JOHNSON/Standard Examiner

I'm doing my reporter thing, pen poised over a notebook as I ask Rob Hunter some sort of innocent question, one of those "How do you . . ." or "Why do you . . ." types of things. He ignores me for a couple of seconds, then replies.

"I'll answer that in a minute," he said. "Right now, I need to concentrate on this landing."

Oh, yeah. Good idea. Excellent idea.

I'm interviewing Hunter from the passenger seat of his single engine Maule MT-7-235, an elegant little airplane designed

especially for short takeoffs and landings. He's getting ready to land his craft on a short dirt landing strip, etched onto a flat piece of ground beside the San Rafael River, and I'm going to shut up and let him.

From a few hundred feet above the ground, the dirt strip seemed sizable enough, a broad, straight slash into the desert floor. But when the plane's finished banking around in a tight turn and is suddenly coming in a couple of dozen feet above the earth, it seems impossibly narrow. Hunter's working to level it off, wings fluttering, engine cutting back, landing gear and earth drawing nearer to the inevitable meeting. I'm thinking about a piece of thread going through the eye of a needle. At about 45 miles an hour.

On both sides of the runway are stands of cottonwood trees, and the tiny strip that runs between them is no more than 50 feet wide. I notice the fall colors, not as individual leaves, but as a blur of yellow as the plane lightly bounces, then rolls and bumps over the ground.

It's not so much frightening as it is exhilarating, something like the feeling you get on your first ride in a roller coaster. When the plane rolls to a stop, a little more than halfway down the quarter-mile long strip, I let out the breath I've been holding in my lungs in a low, sustained exhalation. Hunter grins at me as he removes his headset and drapes it over the controls.

"Now, what was your question?" he asked.

We'd just landed at the Mexican Mountain airstrip, roughly halfway between the towns of Price and Green River in the heart of the San Rafael Swell.

It's actually the second chance I'd had to hold my breath. Earlier, I'd flown from the SkyPark Airport in Woods Cross with another pilot, Brent Watson, in his Cessna 182 when we dropped into the Hidden Splendor landing strip on Muddy Creek, 30 or 40 miles to the south.



ROBERT JOHNSON/Standard-Examiner

This aerial view shows the Hidden Splendor airstrip, 20 miles northwest of Hanksville in the San Rafael Swell.

There, we'd hooked up with Karl Spielman, who'd flown in from Monticello to meet us.

Hunter, Watson and Spielman are all members of the Utah Backcountry Pilots Association, a loose organization of about 130 to 140 fliers who find their recreation flying above the "Back of Beyond," author Edward Abbey's name for the remote red-rock country of the Colorado Plateau.

"It's tricky. You need a healthy respect for these strips," Spielman said. "You can't be rusty from lack of flying. You need to have good air-speed control. It's not for everyone."

The group was organized a few years ago, largely to give private pilots a chance to socialize and share information, but primarily to do something to preserve the relative handful of backcountry landing strips that remain in usable condition on public lands in Utah.

The organization was started by Bountiful resident Steve Durtschi, who said he got the idea after spending time flying around in Idaho's Frank Church River of No Return Wilderness, where 19 primitive airstrips provide the only access to much of that 2 million acres of roadless area.

"They're all maintained by old pilots, and it's a wonderful place for people to go," Durtschi said. "There's no access for motorized vehicles, but airplanes are still legal to land. It's kind of adventurous, bouncing around on some of the old strips out there."

There used to be perhaps a hundred of these simple dirt landing strips in Utah, but only a dozen or two usable strips still remain in the Utah backcountry. Most are in the southern half of the state. There is a landing strip on Fremont Island in the Great Salt Lake, but because the island is privately owned, it is not generally accessible.

Most of the strips simply were abandoned because of neglect after a decade or two of disuse. A few others have actually been plowed under.

Beginning during the 1940s, dozens of these little landing strips were carved into the backcountry of Southern Utah, mostly to support mining or ranching activities. The bulk of them were built during the uranium boom of the 1950s and '60s.

Durtschi said he helped organize the backcountry pilots association after he found out so few dirt airstrips are still being used, and that some of them may be threatened.

"Some of them just disappeared, and some sort of came under attack from environmentalists," he said. "We decided, as a handful of pilots, to devote a little attention to them."

As a case in point, in 1998, a landing strip at Taylor Flat, near Browns Park on the Green River near the Utah-Colorado

border, was closed by the BLM. The agency said it was rarely used and should therefore be restored to a natural condition.

The strip had provided easy access to the blue-ribbon trout fishing on the Green, and many pilots were upset when it was closed down. But they had little recourse.

"Taylor Flat is a good example," Watson said. "We were trying to get the (BLM) to leave it open for recreational opportunities, and (Daggett) County was working to keep it open, but they closed it anyway."

Most of the dirt strips that remain are on public land, managed by the Bureau of Land Management. Current regulations won't allow private groups, such as the Utah Backcountry Pilots Association, to maintain the airstrips. It must be done through a right of way granted to a commercial entity, said Joan Hubert, realty specialist for the BLM Price Field Office.

"That's an unwieldy system," Spielman said. "We just want to keep these strips clear of brush."

Spielman said the association is now trying to work with land managers to set up an "Adopt a Runway" system that would allow private pilots to keep these remote strips open and maintained, at no cost to the federal government.

"You can visit with very, very little impact," Spielman said. "A little dust, a little noise, but it's gone almost as soon as you are."

Although every pilot has his or her own reasons for flying, Spielman said, a lot of the members of the backcountry pilots association are dedicated to "enjoying the outdoors in an environmentally sound way."

"We're primarily hikers and backpackers," Spielman said. "With this mode of access, you can't carry in an ATV or a Jet Ski. You can throw in a couple of backpacks, maybe a cooler. Our planes are essentially our pickup trucks, and these landing strips are essentially our trailheads."

* * *

For a few minutes, before we came down at Mexican Mountain, Hunter let me take the controls of his plane as we passed over the San Rafael Reef, the upthrust eastern edge of the San Rafael Swell. It's one of my favorite views from ground level, one that I've often described as spectacular, but from 1,000 feet above, it's mesmerizing, so much so that I almost forget I'm technically flying this airplane.

It's another way of seeing, another way of allowing your senses to absorb what they're telling you.

The geologic pattern of the countryside, the Big Picture, so to speak, becomes apparent. Dry washes aren't simple gravel-filled passages from high ground to low, but an obvious drainage system, rill leading to runnel leading to rivulet,

eventually becoming a large enough watercourse to carve a canyon into the sandstone.

“Pretty amazing country, isn’t it?” Hunter asks, his voice crackling through the intercom.

All I can say is, “Yeah.”

As we pass over the reef, I’m looking down at canyons of all measures, from wide, open clefts in the rock to dark, narrow slots, filled with potholes and pourovers.

Most of these are places I’ve hiked before, places where I’ve obtained a sense of the lay of the land by poring over maps and walking many, many miles. This is country I’ve devoted hundreds of hours to in order to gain a sense of intimacy with the shape and structure of the land. But as I pass over these familiar places, there’s nothing familiar about it.

And to control with the simple turning of a steering yoke, the slight nudge of the rudder control, what you see and how you see it, is beyond incredible, beyond words.

“Do you ever get used to this?” I asked Watson earlier, as we passed over Lone Peak and Mount Timpanogos on the east side of the Wasatch Range. “I mean, do these views, this scenery, ever become routine?”

“No,” he said, as he looked at the snowfields and icefalls starting to shape up on the Lone Peak Cirque, at the clean, white granite pinnacles towering over the distant Utah Valley.

“That’s why I do this.”

Strips the Center of Controversy

Jim Wright

Standard Examiner Staff Writer

The Hidden Splendor airstrip is a spectacular place to land an airplane, tucked as it is against the canyon of Muddy Creek, one of the major drainages that carve through the San Rafael Reef.

The strip is only a little over 2,000 feet long, running parallel to the creek and bordered on either end by cliffs that drop precipitously to the canyon floor below.

It doesn’t get much use, maybe a couple of planes a week, said Karl Spielman, a member of the Utah Backcountry Pilots Association. As backcountry strips go, it’s in pretty good shape, he said.

But it could be made safer, and for pilots, safety is a major concern. But there’s a problem.

Spielman pointed to a cluster of rocks, which had formed a crude fire ring on the edge of the landing strip. He’d moved them off to the side of the strip after landing.

“Technically, I shouldn’t have moved those rocks, because it falls under the category of maintenance,” Spielman said. “And we can’t legally do any maintenance here.”

The airstrip, near the site of an old uranium mine named the Hidden Splendor, is on public land managed by the federal Bureau of Land Management. Although pilots can technically land and take off anywhere on BLM land, unless it’s specifically prohibited, they obviously prefer to land on existing airstrips.

And although the BLM is not currently considering closing existing airstrips, not permitting them to be maintained can essentially do the same thing.

Granting right of way

In August, the Backcountry Pilots Association and Arrow West Aviation of Price applied with the Bureau of Land Management for a right of way that would allow for light maintenance of the strip, Spielman said. The pilots want to remove a few small shrubs along the edge of the strip, erect a windsock to aid pilots in determining wind speed and direction, and clear an old parking area for their planes, he said. They also want to set up a sign warning hikers that the strip is occasionally used by private pilots.

The catch is, a private group cannot apply for a right of way, Spielman said.

“The BLM requires a commercial operation to have a right of way before any maintenance can be done,” he said. “The Backcountry Pilots don’t have the right standing, so Arrow West applied, and we’re officially an interested party.”

The BLM has issued rights of way for other backcountry landing strips, including one at Mineral Bottom on Labyrinth Canyon of the Green River and above Sand Wash on Desolation Canyon of the Green.

After receiving the Hidden Splendor request, the BLM issued a brief Environmental Assessment, announcing it would issue the right of way.

SUWA objects

The Southern Utah Wilderness Alliance, however, objected. In September, it appealed the BLM’s decision to issue the right of way, saying the BLM should have allowed public comments and done a more complete assessment of potential conflicts.

The matter is now on hold. The appeal is before the Department of Interior's Board of Land Appeals, which will decide whether it has merit.

Herb McHarg, of SUWA's Moab office, said SUWA doesn't object to the private use of the landing strip, but does object to the possibility that it could receive more use if it's approved for commercial use.

"The main concern is with what is described in the right of way as the approval for a commercial air taxi service," McHarg said. "Whether or not the backcountry pilots or Arrow West are making a promise that their intentions are only to bring up the safety standards of the airstrip, the permit allows for the commercial service."

McHarg said any expanded use of the airstrip could have negative effects on the area's wildlife.

"Airplanes are very noisy, and they can create an impact to wildlife, raptors especially, and to the bighorn sheep in the area," McHarg said. "A big noise coming down from the sky, reverberating through the canyons, has a big impact on wildlife."

Commercial status

Mark Francis, owner of Arrow West Aviation, said the effects would be minimal, both on the ground and in the air.

"Expanding that strip would be a major construction effort," he said. "We're looking to do light maintenance, hand work only."

Francis said he's had little public demand to visit remote areas that are accessible by airplane, but admits that could change.

"The strips are usable as recreational strips, but they carry no legitimacy that way," Francis said. "We're requesting the BLM grant a commercial right of way to use it for commercial operations, which legitimizes the strip. It allows us to take in hikers, backpackers."

Wilderness designation

Part of the problem with the Hidden Splendor landing strip is that it's on the border of an area proposed for wilderness by SUWA and other groups, under legislation pending in Congress.

Wilderness designation does not, by itself, force land managers to close existing airstrips, or to restrict their use and maintenance, said Dennis Willis, outdoor recreation planner for the BLM Price Field Office. There are many frequently used landing strips in Idaho's River of No Return Wilderness in National Forest lands along the Middle Fork of the Salmon River, for example.

McHarg said the BLM should allow the public to have a voice in whether private aircraft should be permitted to use landing strips in potential wilderness areas, or whether they should be there at all.

"I think there are any number of these backcountry airstrips that pose a threat to the resource values that exist in those areas," McHarg said. "There needs to be some opportunity for backcountry landing strips, but they don't have to be in or adjacent to wilderness study areas. And the public should have a say in those decisions."

Hansen's proposal

Those decisions may soon be taken out of the hands of the BLM or other federal land management agencies.

Rep. Jim Hansen, R-Utah, a private pilot himself, is co-sponsor of a bill that would prevent land management agencies from closing backcountry landing strips or restricting use by private pilots without the approval of state aviation authorities. House Resolution 1363 would also require a 90-day comment public period on backcountry landing strip closures.

In the meantime, Spielman said, the backcountry pilots are waiting for the day when it will be legal to clean up old fire rings on the Hidden Splendor airstrip.

"We just want to keep it clear of brush," he said. "We just want to come out here and camp, like anyone else."

Document That Landing!

The Back Country Airstrip Foundation is documenting emergency uses of back country airstrips throughout the West. Emergency uses could include landings due to mechanical problems with an airplane, weather related, or for medical reasons, including evacuations of persons on the ground. We are also interested in reports of vandalism and sabotage to back country airstrips. Search and Rescue uses are also requested.

It is the belief of the Foundation members that back country airstrips in the West offer not only recreational opportunities for pilots, but also legitimate landing areas in a time of need. As public land managers make policies concerning back country airstrips, it is important for us to be able to show evidence of these other critical uses. So, please let us know if you have an instance to report.

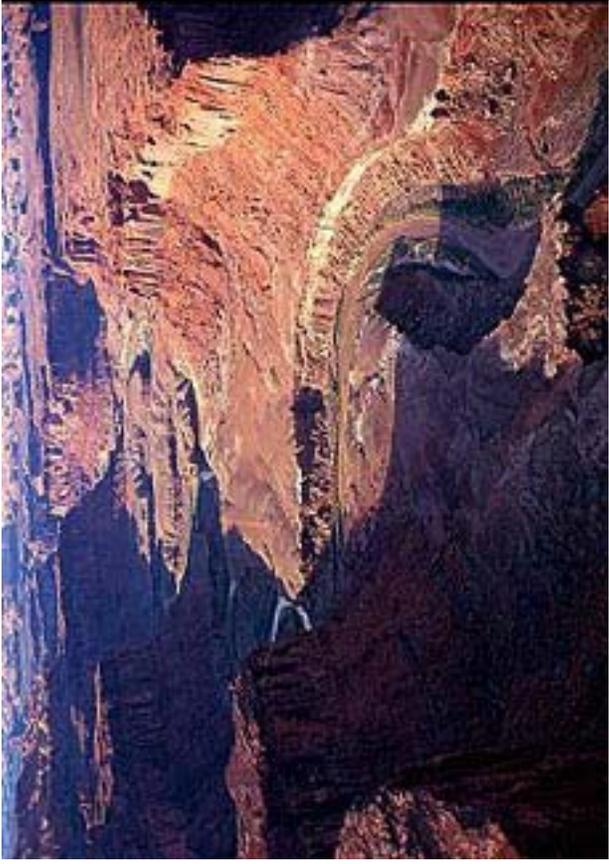
Dan Lilja
Backcountry Airstrip Foundation
pln3083@blackfoot.net

If you don't have email, contact one of the UBCP officers.



Hidden Splendor Airstrip
Wark

Airphoto, Jim



Dirty Devil Airstrip
Wark

Airphoto, Jim



Mineral Canyon Fly-in
Durrtschi

Steve



Mexican Mountain Takeoff
Examiner

ROBERT JOHNSON/ Standard-

UTAH BACK COUNTRY PILOTS
Skypark Airport
1887 South Redwood Road #16
Woods Cross, UT 84087



Air Mail to Master Pilot:

Your Opinion, Please

In this issue of Air Mail we have included some color photos of back country airstrips in Utah. Many people have commented about liking these color pictures, and want to see them continue. If you are one of these people, we could use your help. Color duplication is approximately three to five times more expensive than black and white. Please help defray these costs by sending your contributions.

Please also send your comments about whether you would like to see the color photos included in future issues of Air Mail. A straw pole conducted over the internet returned mixed results. Some folks prefer to use the money for other purposes and get color images from the web, while others would like to see the color images in the paper copy of the newsletter.

This issue of Air Mail includes articles from a variety of new sources, as well as some you will recognize. In order for this variety to continue, we need your participation. Please contact Brent Watson with your submission for the next issue of the UBCP newsletter..

UBCP Web Site

The internet address for the UBCP's new web site is www.UtahBackCountryPilots.org. The searchable database of Utah's back country airstrips is now fully functional. If you have corrections, additions, photos, (JPEG, about 80,000 pixels, i.e. 200x400) or additional comments on the airstrips, please e-mail them to Rob at ubcp-rob@home.com. He will add them to the database. Many other great features are planned, including a bulletin board where we can share up to the minute information about our back country airstrips

Did you know there is a back country e-mail list? It is a good way to get questions answered quickly. If you have a question about back country flying in Utah there is a good chance that someone on the list knows the answer. To sign up, send an e-mail to majordomo@lists.xmission.com. In the body of the e-mail type "subscribe ubcp" (don't use the quotes). You can leave the subject line blank and shouldn't add any other words. You will then be sent an e-mail with an authorization code. Then you need to send another e-mail to majordomo@lists.xmission.com with that authorization code line in the body of your message. That's all you need to do to enjoy the wisdom of your fellow pilots.