

Air Mail

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Utah Back Country Pilots Inc.

Winter 2009

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UBCP CFI Listing

We have fielded multiple requests for referrals to certificated flight instructors and aviation safety counselors within the UBCP group who are willing and able to offer flight instruction or counseling with an emphasis on back country and mountain flying operations. The following are UBCP flight instructors:

Cliff Allen	CFI/CFII	Lenox, MA	(801) 573-1956
David Beaver	CFI/CFII,ASC	Houston, TX	(281) 851-8960
Steve Durtschi	CFI	SLC	(801) 292-9372
Holly Haag	CFI/CFII/ME	SLC	(801) 876-2410
Matt Haag	CFI/CFII/MEI,ASC	SLC	(801) 876-2410
Jess Hall	CFI	PUC/CNY	(435) 637-4502
Hal Hilburn	CFI,ASC	SGU	(435) 574-2808
Larry Newby	CFI	CNY/PUC	(435) 650-6204
Deanna Strand	CFI/CFII/MEI, DPE GJT		(970) 243-4359
Chris Tuckfield	CFI/CFII	SLC	(801) 573-5767
LaVar Wells	CFI	HVE/CNY	(435) 542-3248

If you are a flight instructor and would like to be added or need to update your information on this list please contact Susan Terrell (newsletter@utahbackcountrypilots.org) for changes to be included in the next newsletter.

You Know You've Landed on a REAL Backcountry Airstrip When...

"You can shut down smack dab in the middle of the strip without any qualms, get out, lay on the ground and listen to pure silence..."

"The only tracks in the mud belong to two moose, a porcupine, birds, and your dog..."

(thanks to the pilots at www.backcountrypilots.org)

UBCP President's Message

Steve Durtschi

UBCP Fall Fly-In

We were pretty disappointed that the UBCP fly-in was a bust. Fall in Utah is typically beautiful flying weather with clear skies and light winds. Who would have thought that for two weeks in a row we would have rain and low clouds? We were especially excited about the invitation we had received from the Huntington Airport and Emery County Commissioners to meet at their airport. I know in the past we have had some great times at Mineral Canyon, but Huntington will be a fine place for a fly-in. It is a larger airport with one paved and two dirt runways, so virtually any airplane can attend. Training on the dirt can take place right there. The airport is only a few minutes away from several of Utah's back country landing strips for morning and evening fly-outs. Huntington also has a new self-serve fuel system.

The county had eagerly anticipated the fly-in and had planned on food for everyone. Leon Defriez, the airport manager, had bladed the weeds off of a large area for camping and even a fire pit had been prepared. We certainly appreciate Emery County's invitation and look forward to next year.

Western Backcountry Ethic

Utah's recreational landing strips are getting a lot of use. I think that is great. That's what they are for. Idaho has served as our model and I have been flying in the Idaho back country now for almost 20 years. In that time, I do not believe that Idaho's backcountry landing strips or the immediate areas surrounding them have been negatively impacted. Chamberlain Basin is one of our favorites. The Forest Service has cones down the runway directing operations to one side one year and the other side the next. This allows the grass to have a chance to get established and seems to work well. The airstrip looks the same this year as it did when I first visited back in the 80s. The same goes for the camping areas. Even though the camp grounds see use virtually every week in the summer, I have been hard pressed to find even the slightest bit of trash left behind. If a camper is not already in "our" spot, it honestly looks like no one has been there for a long time. Unburned camp fire wood is stacked neatly next to the fire pit. The fire pit contains no bits of tin foil or plastic. Pilots truly try to leave the area better than they found it.

I see the same thing at our Utah landing strips. I'm glad that this culture has spilled over into Utah. The Utah backcountry is being "discovered" more and more every year, yet the landing strips and camping areas are as neat and tidy as ever. The backcountry pilot community should be commended for this.

Closed Areas

Utah has more landing strips than we have *landing strips*. What I mean is some of those landing strips out there are *not really landing strips* any more. Back in the olden days, it was an easy task to blade a runway to allow air access to a mine, drill rig, or other project

where people and equipment could be moved in or out. Many of these runways remain although the land status has changed over the years. Now days, an inviting runway happened upon by an unwary pilot may not be legal to land on. As a general rule, National Parks, National Monuments, and National Recreation Areas are closed to backcountry aviators. There are exceptions, but they are few; Glen Canyon National Recreation Area contains a few airports, but the majority of the strips created prior to the Rec. Area are now closed. Unless specifically closed by the local BLM Superintendent, landing strips on BLM lands are open for use by airplanes. The same is true for state lands. Without prior permission, private lands should always be considered closed. S.E. Utah has a fairly busy air charter business carrying passengers to private locations, so even though there may be airplanes on the ground with a good looking runway, this is no justification to just "drop in."

With more than 200 past and present Utah landing strips easily visible from the air, you can imagine that it might be difficult to tell just by flying over what the status of a particular airfield is. I would recommend researching prospective destinations carefully. If you are still in doubt, call the BLM or park service and check with them. Private Utah airstrip owners are particularly friendly and may grant permission to visit. A good source for local knowledge of these strips is Redtail Aviation at the Carbon County and Canyonlands Airports. The Redtail pilots are accomplished and professional and can give you a checkout of public airstrips as well as assist in obtaining permission to visit some incredible private air fields.

Landing Strip Maintenance

One final item concerning Utah's recreational landing strips – the official status of many of these runways is somewhat tenuous, meaning that a specific management plan is not currently in effect. UBCP's goal is to get a long term management plan recognized by government land managers at the strips currently in use. For the present, unless a lease or other arrangement is approved, the BLM allows only what is termed "casual maintenance" at any strip on lands they manage. Casual maintenance means rock and brush removal with hand tools only. A wind sock may be replaced if an original pole is present. No improvements may be made and the runway or parking areas may not be enlarged beyond their original shape. UBCP currently has a state lease at the Happy Canyon landing strip, but even at that we are not allowed to make any improvements or permanent structures beyond the original "as built" condition. (Happy Canyon is open unrestricted to all non-commercial operations).

How You Can Help

Utah's recreational landing strips are healthy and we feel that by working with land managers within the scope of allowed activities, UBCP has over the years developed a good relationship with Utah State Aeronautics and State and Federal land managers. Here are some ideas where you can help:

1. **Wind Sock Initiative** – One of UBCPs goals is to keep a good wind sock up where allowed and at strips that are utilized. We have several pre-fabricated wind sock poles and new frames and socks, and these can be broken down to fit in a larger airplane like a 182. If you know of a location that currently does not have a wind sock; one can be legally erected; the location is used by pilots, AND – you are willing to organize a "wind sock" party – call us and we will help coordinate the effort. UBCP would consider private locations if they are open via permission to all pilots.

2. **Landing Threshold Cones at Happy Canyon** – Those who frequent Happy Canyon know that the western touchdown point can be hard to identify until some experience has been gained. We have kept orange cones at the threshold, but they are now faded and difficult to see. UBCP has a new set, located at Bountiful Skypark. If someone would volunteer to take them down, place them in position and bring back the old ones for disposal, that would be great.
3. **UBCP Correspondents** – We would love to have a few state-wide Correspondents. Maybe an Eastern, Central, and Southern Correspondent to act as a UBCP contact in those areas? This person should be available to attend a meeting if needed, check on runway conditions and provide input for the newsletter.

If you are interested in any of these ideas or have some of your own, please contact UBCP through the web site or myself directly at (801) 292-9372.

Sincerely,
Steve Durtschi

UBCP Editor's Message

Susan Terrell

I'm enjoying the opportunity to put this newsletter together for you. As I do, I will continue to strive to earn more of the positive responses I kindly received for the last issue. But it is *your* contributions that will keep this newsletter informative, educational and entertaining, so please don't hesitate to contact me with stories, suggestions, and/or thoughts. Even "gentle" hints that you're bored will be taken constructively; I'll try to fix that!

Your president, Steve Durtschi, had the idea for an "Instructor's Corner," where experienced backcountry pilots and CFI's can offer advice on techniques and some flying tips. I'll be contacting members who fall into those categories soon, and hope that you'll consider contributing for future editions of the newsletter. We're also going to start a "Member and Airplane Profile" section. I hope you'll enjoy the first of these about members Larry and Jed Hall's amazing "Stork" project. If you have a suggestion for a future profile, again – please contact me.

Also in this issue is the story of member Adam Rosenberg's adventures flying with LaVar Wells. Adam is a member resident of Arizona, but now also an avid Utah backcountry flyer. And don't miss Rob Hunter's description of recent improvements made to the UBCP website www.utahbackcountrypilots.org. For those of you inclined to put hands to the keyboard and surf the internet when you're grounded, UBCP is hoping to revive the website as it has the Newsletter. The goal is to make the website a valuable backcountry pilot resource as well as a way for fellow UBCP members – and others interested in flying Utah's backcountry – to communicate with one another. An e-mail to members at the end of 2008 brought back responses from many of you indicating that improving communication was important to you. The Board listened, and hopes the website improvements will help facilitate better pilot and member communication in the future.

Blue Skies ~ Susan

(Please contact me at newsletter@utahbackcountrypilots.org with your comments and any content suggestions or contributions.)

UBCP Member and Airplane Profile

by Steve Durttschi

Larry and Jed Hall have been UBCP members from the outset, and backcountry supporters long before that. Larry and Jed Hall are also airplane builders. Their newest creation is a scaled replica Fiesler Fi 156 "Stork." Now there are airplane builders, and then there are *airplane builders*. Larry and Jed did not assemble the backcountry airplane you see here, they built it. Excepting standard hardware, they built every component; they welded the entire structure including the complicated landing gear hydraulic shock absorbers; they fabricated the complex struts and leading edge slats, and they formed the compound curves of the cowling. To say that these guys are talented puts it pretty mild.



Jed and Larry Hall with their Fiesler Fi 156 "Stork"

Before we talk about the Hall airplane, let's go back in time about 60 years. We sometimes think the "backcountry" airplane is relatively new, but some of the best ones have been around for a long time.

The year was 1944 and Italy – an Axis sympathizer – had collapsed. The dictator Mussolini had been captured and was being held in an Italian Villa high in the Alps. Hitler was determined to rescue his former ally and sent a crack commando team to find him and bring him to Germany. The rescue team overwhelmed the Villa and planned on transporting Mussolini using one of the then new helicopters that Germany had developed. At the last minute however, the helicopter broke down. Desperate, the team called on the only other flying machine that could do the job – the remarkable Fiesler Fi 156 Stork.

The Stork landed literally in the Villa courtyard. The pilot doubted that he could get airborne with the additional weight of a passenger. Mussolini has hustled aboard, the Stork turned about with a blast of power, and then at the last minute, the commando team leader jumped in! The fabric covered airplane, now "over gross" trundled off the courtyard, lost altitude over the edge and then flew off to safety. The whole episode probably all in a day's work for the Stork.

The prototype Stork first flew in 1937. The small Fiesler Company eventually built about 2,800 of the type. Everything about the airplane maximized short take off from unprepared fields. The Stork served in every theater and its exploits will provide movie scripts for many years to come. Captured Storks were valued prizes and it is said that the British General Montgomery used one for his personal airplane. The successful airplane was also built for a while after WWII as a civilian design.

The Stork was a fairly large airplane with a wing span of about 46 feet. Larry and Jed's replica is $\frac{3}{4}$ scale which makes it a little bigger than a Super Cub. The Halls Stork is more properly a Pazmany PL-9. Designed by Ladisiao Pazmany as a scaled down Fi 156, their Stork weighs about 1300 pounds and is powered by a 260-hp Lycoming engine. It doesn't really "take off" – it seems to levitate after a short ground roll.



Larry and Jed have now completed the mandatory 25 hours of restricted use for a home built airplane and are expanding the places they visit. In addition to local off-field locations around their home airport of Morgan County (42U), they have had the airplane at a few other backcountry locations around northern Utah. We look forward to seeing the remarkable little Stork replica in the Utah backcountry.

UBCP Member Jim Brady recently sent in this photo he took on a trip to Dirty Devil last year:



"This is looking west, back at the strip. The north end of the strip is at the center left of the frame, with the windsock barely visible."

And member Jim Morton shared an "almost" encounter of a *hoofed* kind on a lesson in backcountry flying with LaVar Wells last November (sorry, no picture!)

"A little over a week ago I got a lesson on some strips from LaVar Wells. They were Hidden Splendor, Mexican Mountain, Dirty Devil and Happy Canyon. It was a great experience, and later that day I went into Hidden Splendor alone in my Varga before heading back to Grassy Meadows near Hurricane. The first landing with LaVar was especially exciting. It was at Hidden Splendor, and although flying through the narrow canyon for the first time was interesting, it was the herd of Big Horn Sheep that ran across the runway right in front of us that really got our attention. Fortunately we missed the last one by about 25 feet. They were beautiful animals up close."

Learning to Fly the Utah Backcountry with LaVar Wells

by Adam Rosenberg

A few years ago I flew into Canyonlands Airport and the fellow behind the counter said I should think about a trip to Hidden Splendor, a tough, little, backcountry strip. When I got home – for the same reason I read about rock climbing, ironman triathlons, and racing Bugattis and Porches – I got a DVD video called "Out There Flying" and a backcountry, dirt-strip directory called "Fly Utah!" to read about this kind of adventure flying. In my mind, this was a land of Huskies, Maules, and other little tail-draggers with big motors and bigger tires; I didn't think my Piper Cherokee would have a place in this world.

Then there was an article in Pilot Getaways Magazine about Hidden Splendor. That pushed my curiosity and interest up enough to figure the worst they could do is laugh at me. I called Red Tail Aviation, the FBO at CNY and was referred to LaVar Wells.

He didn't laugh at me. He even suggested that a Cherokee 140 could do just fine. I found out after flying together that his airplane was a Cessna 172 with 145 horsepower, about the same weight and power I had.

LaVar has a terrific reputation and it didn't take long to see why. Not only does he love the back-country, not only does he love sharing the back-country, he loves teaching people to fly in it. I showed up at Hanksville on 2007 November 15, at 8:00 in the morning after a wonderful morning flight from CNY. After a brief discussion with me about what we would do, we climbed into my Cherokee, he pointed to a dirt crosswind runway, and I practiced short-field landings and takeoffs. I did well enough for him to feel confident about taking me and my airplane into some exciting places.

It is hard for me to imagine growing up in this forbidding landscape; I had to wonder if anything so strange ever becomes comfortable? One booklet I saw years ago said you should see Utah with one eye closed so it only seems half as strange. The natives of this land are prickly plants and odd-looking animals, while we who are not natives are guests who may visit this wilderness and then should probably go back home. But this land is LaVar's home, and he fits right in.

Frank Fine, my primary instructor 22 years ago, takes joy in aviation and shares that joy exquisitely with his many students, primary, instrument, and other. "Aviation will give you many happy years if you respect it," he told his students at our first flying lessons and he shared both the joy and the respect parts of it. LaVar feels and shares the same joy in flying the backcountry and shares the same respect for the specific hazards of the backcountry.

We climbed northeast out of Hanksville and ten or fifteen minutes later came to the San Rafael Reef, a wall of rock created by geologic forces of unimaginable power.

The approach to Hidden Splendor is interesting: enter the canyon at 6,000 feet with rocks on both sides, sharp left in the canyon, sharp right just over a small mesa, keep close to the left canyon wall curving right, and the strip appears quickly on the right side.

Approach to Hidden Splendor



He did the first approach for me, so I could learn the approach and take pictures, and he had me land on the strip itself. The second time it was talk only from LaVar – I was busy flying the canyon approach.



Turning final Hidden Splendor

The notion of descending into an airport I couldn't see was novel to me. Having canyon walls on both sides of me was also new and scary. The whole Hidden Splendor experience demanded a new level of flying performance.

After stopping for a while at Mexican Mountain, we noted it had a short runway but an easy climb once airborne. At this point LaVar decided to give me some backcountry training by flying the Green River canyon just over the water. This is a beautiful flight and it took me a while to get used to having water right below me and rocks on both sides. The river has its geology and its canyon has a rhythm. It took a while, but I began to understand the rhythm and to follow the river more easily.



Flying the Green River canyon

We flew over Mineral Canyon but did not land because the ground there was too soft. Actually, landing would have been easy, but takeoff would have been difficult in my airplane.

We saw Upheaval Dome from the air:



Up close from the ground it doesn't make sense, but the whole shape comes into view from above. Remember the scene in the Matthew Broderick version of "Godzilla" where there are a bunch of guys standing in a depression saying they had seen no sign of a giant-lizard monster? As I remember it, the camera angle widens and the movie watchers see that they're standing in a giant footprint.

We landed at Hite at the north end of Lake Powell. The runway there has four segments that almost line up and the best approach is not from Lake Powell to the south but from the Dirty Devil River to the north. Like many backcountry airstrips, the straight-in approaches are blocked by rocks in both directions.

On the way back to Hanksville, LaVar suggested I land at Angel Point on my way back to Canyonlands. I felt proud that I had earned a backcountry solo landing, at least on an unobstructed backcountry strip on a clear day with no wind. In the four hours we spent in and around my airplane, LaVar taught me to appreciate the beauty of the Utah backcountry and to appreciate the skills needed to fly safely in it.

My next trip to Moab, I called LaVar to set up another back-country lesson on 2008 November 26. I realize at one lesson a year I'm not going to be an expert, but I like to think some of my learning would stick for a year. LaVar felt my pilot skills were quite good enough, but my airplane's engine is not performing well enough to get out of some of the places he wanted to take me. I have a new and stronger engine on order for 2009 February, but I'm still flying my 1979 engine. It's working fine, but it doesn't have the power for these short, high airstrips. LaVar offered his airplane instead, with him in the left seat instructing through example and talk rather than right-seat, back-seat driving. It would be a chance to see an expert fly Utah.



LaVar Wells and the author

So I climbed into the right seat and we took off together from Hanksville into the beautiful backcountry. There are many measures of an airplane pilot – holding altitude, partial panel flight in clouds, keeping navigation needles perfectly centered, navigating in various ways, making perfect coordinated turns, takeoffs and landings. For a variety of reasons, I have found that landing an airplane in lots of different places (and taking off again) is how I see myself as a better pilot. LaVar seems to feel the same way.

If perfect landings and takeoffs are the standard of the day, then LaVar showed me flying at its best. In addition to the two landings at normal airports we did eight backcountry airstrip landings:

Hidden Splendor	(WPT660)
Mexican Mountain	(WPT692)
Cedar Mountain	(WPT679)
Sage Brush	(WPT687)
Sand Wash	(WPT676)
Mineral Canyon	(UT75)
Happy Canyon	(UT97)
Dirty Devil	(WPT764)

Each was as perfect as I could judge with approach and airspeed aimed at a precise landing point for a gentle touchdown and an easy rollout. Landings not at the immediately closest point were done to avoid rocky terrain that might damage a nosewheel or propeller. Each approach was explained to me as we did it, some were normal traffic patterns while others were more adventurous paths to a landing.

We stopped in Sand Wash for a bit to enjoy the scenery before heading back south to Canyonlands for fuel.

Canyonlands National Park



The leg from Sand Wash to Canyonlands was flown mostly in the Green River Canyon as I had done the previous year. Instead of being busy maintaining altitude over the water and spacing between the canyon walls, I was able to enjoy the utter beauty of this place. The canyons rhythm was apparent as we flew it smoothly and perfectly coordinated. Most of us pilots like to think all our turns are perfect, but we slip and slide a little and the ball wanders a bit for us. As passengers, we can tell when a pilot actually does maintain coordinated turns.

The price of pilot perfection is practice. I recall somebody telling a great musician, "I would give my life to play like you do," to which he replied "Madam, I have." LaVar has flown this country months, years, and decades. His love for it shows in everything he does in the air and his respect for it shows in how he does it. I may have learned more about flying as his passenger than I would actively flying myself with verbal instruction.

Finally, we did take my bird into the air so I could practice the approach to Hidden Splendor. I feel I could land there solo and LaVar feels I could land there solo. When I get my new 160-HP engine, I look forward to doing that. The FAA may not recognize any official endorsement to land at Hidden Splendor, but I do.

So what have I learned in earning my Utah backcountry solo endorsement? I've learned one more aspect of flying an airplane that I didn't know before I flew here. Precise flying is a prerequisite for backcountry flight. Canyon approaches and short runways require good flying skills. One-way airstrips and un-flyable gusty winds require good judgment. Learning from more experienced pilots is an essential part of a backcountry pilot education.

The corollary of precise and skilled flying is respect. Knowing our limitations is essential when exceeding them is punished by crashing into rocks. This is no place for horsing around. If you want to see the canyons, formations, and hide-away airstrips of Utah's backcountry, then you should leave any cowboy attitudes behind.

The reward for this discipline is the immediate and immense beauty of the backcountry. I've landed in a lot of places and flown over a lot of scenery and there is nothing else like the places I flew here. Now that I have flying experience and the benefit of La Var's teaching, I want to see the other canyons, formations, and hide-away airstrips of Utah's backcountry. There are formations and shapes here that bring intense joy to pilot and passengers alike. LaVar's long experience tells me the joy of this place can last as long as we fly here. I look forward to coming back. (*Editors Note: Visit Adam Rosenberg's website at: <http://the-adam.com/adam/bryce/utahback2.htm>*)

UBCP "International" Member



Daniela and Walter Elmer are UBCP members who live in Switzerland. They sent us the above photo of four Swiss members at Ibex. This year was their 8th flying trip to the US where they report having "a great and adventurous time in Utah." In addition to Ibex they have been to Bar Ten, Hite and Needles Outpost. Because of heavily loaded planes and high temperatures, they have taken many low passes over Mineral Canyon, Hidden Splendor, Angel Point, Dolores Point and other backcountry airstrips, but prudently decided not to land. Daniela and Walter appreciate that the strips exist, even the ones they have not landed at, and thanked UBCP for our part in the "wonderful chance to fly the backcountry."

UBCP Makes Major Website Improvements

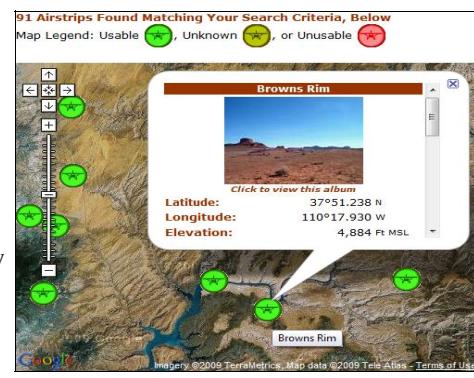
by Rob Hunter

To make it an even more useful resource for you, we have recently made quite a few improvements to the Utah Backcountry Pilots website. We have improved the airstrip mapping, the photo albums, and done a lot of work on the forum.

When you go to the "Airport Data" page from the main menu at www.UtahBackCountryPilots.org you have always been able to search for airstrips via condition, length, elevation and of course, by name. Now it is easy to also find an airstrip by its location. When you go to the "Airport Data" or "Search Airstrips" page, you will see a Google Map of all of the airstrips that match the selected criteria. This makes it easy to find out more about an airstrip you happened across while flying even though you do not know its name. The map defaults to showing only the airstrips that are reported to be useable, but you can change the selection criterion to show more or less airstrips.

Google Map on UBCP Website

Then – using the normal Google Map controls – you can zoom in and out of the satellite view. By zooming in you may even see an airplane at some of the backcountry airstrips! Please keep in mind that these satellite images are not live and cannot be used to determine current runway conditions.



When you roll your mouse pointer over any of the dots marking an airstrip you should see the name of the airstrip. If you click one of the dots a pop-up menu will appear with all of the information we have compiled on the airstrip, as well as links to photos, topographical maps, and PIREPS on our forum. Please remember that just because an airstrip is labeled as "useable," does not mean that in its current condition it can be safely used. Airstrip conditions in the backcountry can change quickly and airplane and pilot ability vary widely. We mark an airstrip as usable when we have received reports of the airstrip being used. Since conditions can change so quickly, any of this information can be out of date.

Google Earth Image of Mexican Mountain

For those of you who have Google Earth installed on your computer, you can download a file of Utah Backcountry Airstrips and take advantage of all the features of Google



Earth, such as "flying" from place to place and viewing the terrain from an angle similar to an approach to an airstrip.

The best way to get the most current information on any Utah backcountry airstrip is to check the forum. Only UBCP members are allowed to post on the forum. Here any member can post airstrip condition updates from their most recent trip. Since these reports are saved, reading reports from previous years can give you an idea about future conditions such as what time of year does the snow typically disappear from a given airstrip. The forum is also a good place to ask questions, either about a specific airstrip or about backcountry flying in general. To make the forum easier to access, we have done quite a lot of programming to make your main UBCP login also log you into the forum. We also have added a direct link from the main page, as well as a list of the most recent posts on the bottom of the main page to make checking the forum easier.

The UBCP website also has a Photo Album divided into several sections, each with hundreds of photos and videos of backcountry airstrips. Although anyone can view these albums, only UBCP members can add photos or videos to them. The sections are: Top Backcountry Airstrips; Other Airstrips; Club Activities and Member Albums. The “Top Backcountry Airstrip” section has the 25 most popular airstrips in Utah and is a good place to look when planning your first visit. The “Other Airstrip” section contains the photos of the rest of our airstrips. “Club Activities” shows photos of fly-ins and work parties.

Every UBCP member is invited to start their own online album of backcountry flying adventures in the “UBCP Members Album” section. There are already hundreds of great photos here! Logging into the UBCP website will automatically log you into the photo album so you can post pictures.

“Mini”Instructors Corner

(editors note: refers to the size of this issue’s edition of this feature and is not intended to be commentary regarding the author’s status as a CFI)

Good Radio Skills in the Backcountry

by Steve Durtschi

Good radio skills are essential in the backcountry. If there is no ground based radio (Unicom, Tower, Flight Service, etc..) airplanes are to broadcast in the “blind” on what is called the multicom frequency. This frequency is always 122.9 Mhz. Standard phraseology applies, but pilots should perk their ears up and listen carefully in the vicinity of the runway as the terrain often renders the airspace tighter than a typical airport. Backcountry runways are almost never marked with their magnetic orientation and a good call is simply “*landing upstream*,” or “*taxiing for takeoff toward the west*.” Traffic patterns are also almost always non-standard. The radio call should simply give the appropriate information to alert other pilots in the area as to your intentions, *Cessna one two three is inbound to Mineral Canyon from five north, at six thousand – circle to land.*”

Concise position reports also enhance safety. The inclination may be to think there is no one around in very remote areas, but just the opposite is usually the case. Backcountry landing strips have natural arrival and departure routes most follow due to terrain and they can be pretty congested. “*Yellow Cessna is turning east from the Dirty Devil drainage and descending out of eight thousand for Happy Canyon,*” is a good example of a position report.

Flash Bulletin: Backcountry Flyers Are “Crazy” According to Aerobatic Show Pilots

by Susan Terrell

In October 2007, I had the pleasure of spending a week at VNY in Southern California, interviewing pilots from the documentary film “One Six Right” as part of the research for my book.

Two of the aviators I had the honor to speak with, were former award-winning aerobatic show pilots – Edan Shalev and Keith Leedom. Edan flew all of the aerobatic sequences in the film, and was Keith’s primary instructor when he decided that flying from point A to point B wasn’t exciting enough for him, and decided to enter the world of aerobatics.

Keith had suggested that it might be interesting for me to not only interview the two of them separately, but also to find time for the two of them together to bounce stories and questions off each other. I’m glad to say we were able to arrange that.

During the course of a fascinating interview with the two of them, the subject of backcountry and mountain flying came up. They both smiled and said, “Now *there* … are some crazy pilots.” I laughed and said I thought that was a pretty funny comment coming from two guys who flew competitive aerobatics; some people think *they* are the crazy ones.

To their credit, they immediately got serious and offered me some interesting – and ultimately respectful – perspective on backcountry pilots, “what they do is more dangerous than what we do in my opinion” was Edan’s response, “when we do stuff it’s always the same routine – you’re in the box, you know where you are orientation wise. When you’re in the mountains you don’t know where the wind is coming from, you don’t know what’s around the corner; a lot of people get stuck and boxed in.”

They both felt mountain and backcountry flying required acceptance as well as knowledge of the “uncontrollable,” like weather. To them, the kind of flying they do, is all about control and management of risk. I told them that from the savvy backcountry instructors and flyers I’ve been privileged to spend time with, I could sit there and say without hesitancy that they feel the same way. What’s risk, and how to manage it – is all relative. And they agreed.

I reflect back on their comments as I write this, and realize the “crazy” determination is indeed perspective on the part of who is doing the labeling. The bottom line? Once you slip into that left seat as PIC, it’s not about sane or crazy; hammerheads or downdrafts – it’s about being a disciplined, focused and safe pilot regardless of what you decide to do with a plane, be it backcountry flying or aerobatics.

“To fly! to live as airmen live! Like them to ride the skyways from horizon to horizon, across rivers and forests! To free oneself from the petty disputes of everyday life, to be active, to feel the blood renewed in one’s vein — ah! that is life. . . . Life is finer and simpler. My will is freer. I appreciate everything more, sunlight and shade, work and my friends. The sky is vast. I breathe deep gulps of the fine clear air of the heights. I feel myself to have achieved a higher state of physical strength and a clearer brain. I am living in the third dimension!” — Henri Mignot, ‘L’Aviation de L’Amateur; Le Sport de l’Air,’ 1934

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