

Hat Creek Rim termed 'perfect' for hang gliding, paragliding, but not for the novice pilot

By JIM DYAR

If you were to dream up a perfect hang gliding and paragliding site, chances are it might closely resemble Hat Creek Rim.

The rim, which rises 1,000 feet above Hat Creek Valley off Highway 89 in eastern Shasta County, has been a top spot for those who love to soar on the wind since the mid-1970s. In the summer months (typically June through September), afternoon upslope winds and rising thermals combine to make Hat Creek Rim an extremely consistent launch site.

Once the hang gliders or paragliders are in the air, they often sail as high as 2,000 feet above the rim. Some pilots have taken the thermals (rising hot air currents) as high as 4,000 feet above the launch site.

"You can definitely get plenty of air there," said Phil Sergent, who has been hang gliding off the rim since 1974. "It's just an ideal place for ridge soaring. Now it's a well-known site. It's off the beaten path, but it's a super site."

In addition to getting a good lift off Hat Creek Rim, hang gliding and paragliding pilots don't get cheated on the views either. To the south is Lassen Peak and Lassen Volcanic National Park. To the north, is 14,179-foot Mt. Shasta. There's also the lush Hat Creek Valley and nearby Burney Mountain.

Part of the view also includes the surreal aftermath of recent devastating fires. A number of fires started by lightning, known as the Hat Creek Complex Fire, scorched the area in August of 2009.

The rim also offers safe, wide easy landing zones for pilots with nearby amenities, such as Hat Creek Hereford Ranch RV Park and Campground (hatcreekrv.com).

"Folks venture to the area (to fly) because it's so spectacular, beautiful and remote," Sergent said. "The bottom line is when you're there, you're in the backcountry. You're out in the woods, so to speak, compared to a lot of the more populated flying sites. If it were near the Bay Area or Southern California, it would change the experience dramatically."

Burney Mountain, at 7,800 feet, is another launching spot for hang gliding and paragliding. Though also spectacular, fewer pilots fly there because of the long, twisty dirt road approach, Sergent said. Burney Mountain is also a more advanced flying spot than Hat Creek Rim.

Though they launch from the same spots, hang gliders and paragliders are significantly different. Hang gliders typically utilize a V-shaped wing that often has an aluminum frame. Paragliding wings don't have frames, are fairly elliptical and look more like parachutes.

Those who fly at both Hat Creek Rim and Burney Mountain should be

members of the U.S. Hang Gliding and Paragliding Association regardless of their discipline.

Hat Creek Rim "is not a beginner site in any way, shape or form," said Sergent, 55, who lived in Redding for 40 years prior to moving to the Auburn area.

"Only pilots who have mastered the art and technique of hang gliding or paragliding should fly there. As soon as you launch, you're high enough to really hurt yourself if you fall."

Sergent is part of the Shasta Sky Sailors, who formed in Redding in 1974 and made a habit of flying off ridges and mountains all over Shasta County, many which are rarely flown today. Many of the pilots were under age 20 at the club's inception.

A sentence from the information page on the Shasta Sky Sailors at the club's webpage – www.hatcreek.info –



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reads, "In those days we didn't gauge flights by the number of miles we flew or who got the highest ... it was all about flying like a bird and the glorious and sometimes death defying, 360 degree turn."

The club helped pioneer and develop the Hat Creek Rim site. Indeed, Hat Creek Rim has grown right along with

the sport of hang gliding and paragliding.

"It's seen all the evolutions of the sport," Sergent said. "If that ridge could talk, it would have a lot to say. That place, of all the Northern California sites, has provided that consistency (for flying) right up to today. I've always loved what Hat Creek Rim offers."

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