



Coyote Flats used to be one of my favorite airstrips. It sat in a remote valley in California's Sierra Nevada Mountains at 9,988 ft. MSL high above the town of Bishop. The Army built the 3,000-ft. paved airstrip in the 1960s for high-altitude training. It was the highest paved airstrip in the United States, but was later abandoned. Though it wasn't charted and had no identifier, it was on public, Bureau of Land Management (BLM) land, so local pilots started using it. A four-mile hiking trail led from the runway through pine forests, up the side of a canyon, over a ridge, and then down into a secluded valley barely big enough to fit a small lake and adjacent meadow. I spent many nights camped on the lakeshore, yet I never saw another hiker.

In 1998, the BLM unilaterally decided they didn't want the airstrip. A team of bulldozers and trucks made the long trek up to the rarified air at 10,000 ft. and systematically broke up and hauled away the 3,000 ft. of pavement—at substantial cost to the taxpayer. Later, they dug trenches in the runway and marked Xs on both ends with painted white rocks. Rather than expend taxpayer funds to provide a service, they used them to *remove* a service.

Other backcountry airstrips in California where I used to fly have also disappeared: Tunnel Meadows, at 9,100 ft. MSL near Mt. Whitney (the highest peak in the Continental United States) and the John Muir Trail, was closed decades ago; Soggy Dry Lake, within a half-hour flight from the Los Angeles Basin, is no longer an official airport. Today, I can think of only one public, charted backcountry airstrip remaining in the state: Gravelly Valley (featured in Spring 2004). Unfortunately, stories like these have been repeated across the country.

But such events spurred some pilots into action. According to Montana pilot John McKenna, "A bunch of us were sitting around the campfire one night and said, 'By God, somebody had better save these airstrips. If it's not us, then who's it going to be? And if not now, when?'" About 10 years ago, these "airplane campers" assembled a dedicated and talented team to defend backcountry aviation. In 2003, they officially formed the Recreational Aviation Foundation (RAF), a 501(c)(3) public charity "for the preservation, maintenance, and creation of recreational/backcountry airstrips across the nation." McKenna became its president with a current six-member Board of Directors.

From the beginning, the RAF had the best interests of pilots like us in mind. Soon after it formed, then Vice President Mike Sidders started writing a Backcountry Update column in Pilot Getaways that documented much of the organization's early efforts. The work spanned from a pilot shelter at Bozeman Airport to negotiations to prevent the closure of the Wurtz strip (that had recently been used for an emergency landing by a Seneca carrying U.S. Forest Service (USFS) employees). It also included efforts to prevent closure of Tuweep (featured in Spring 2000), which was my favorite airstrip in Arizona,

tucked into a side canyon of the Grand Canyon, and even the donation of a new backcountry strip for public use, Ryan Field, near Glacier National Park.

The RAF has been remarkably successful in getting general aviation officially sanctioned as a legitimate use of public lands. "We bring science and reason and are always professional. We also try to join forces with local

pilots and pilot organizations like the Idaho Aviation Association [IAA], Montana Pilots Association [MPA], and others," says McKenna. This template, combined with dedication and perseverance, works well.

When the USFS started the lengthy process to review public use of the Lewis & Clark National Forest in Montana, the RAF joined forces with the MPA to assure aviation access. The USFS conducted monthly meetings for four years in Great Falls. RAF Board Members Dan Prill and John McKenna attended virtually every one of them. (For McKenna, it was a 100-nm flight or a 200-mile drive.) When the final plan was accepted, it included approval for the RAF and MPA to build a *new backcountry airstrip* at Russian Flat—the first built on USFS land in the Continental United States in more than 45 years.

The agreement stipulated that no cost could be incurred by the USFS, so the RAF and MPA funded more than \$40,000 for supplies, including a special \$13,000 "USFS-approved" outhouse. Over three weeks, volunteers graded a 4,000-ft. native grass airstrip, built an 80x80-ft. airplane "corral" to keep livestock out, installed windsocks, and completed the camping area. The airstrip will open to the public in 2010 to allow the grass to grow in. In September, AOPA President Craig Fuller visited the airstrip and commented that it "is a wonderful example of how a local pilot organization like the MPA in conjunction with the RAF can work to bring a facility like this to the public."

The RAF achievement to date that has the greatest potential for good on Federal Lands was a memo sent this year to directors and regional foresters signed by USFS Chief Abigail Kimbell. It states, "Aviation has been part of our country's heritage, both as a mode of transportation and as a means of access to remote and scenic areas for a wide variety of purposes," and further directs staff "to support use of recreational aircraft and backcountry airstrips on NFS lands where appropriate considering local resource conditions and as part of a balanced, safe, and efficient forest transportation system."

For years, the IAA has been fighting to prevent USFS closure of the "Big Creek Four" backcountry airstrips: Vines, Simonds, Dewey Moore, and Mile Hi. When negotiations with the USFS resumed this year, the Forest Supervisor produced a copy of the Chief's memo and stated that the Forest Service had a new direction on airstrips. She would no longer push for their closure.

Other accomplishments include retention of six airstrips in Montana's Upper Missouri River Breaks National Monument (featured in March/April 2007) with the help of the MPA, and an official agreement between the National Park Service and the RAF for maintenance of three airstrips in Death Valley National Park.

What do the board members earn for all their hard work and travel to places as far away as Florida and Washington D.C.? Zero. The RAF is an all-volunteer organization with supporters in 35 states so far. In addition to volunteering their time, board members cover nearly all expenses personally.

The RAF's mission is not just for backcountry strips; it is for *all* recreational strips across the nation—the kinds of places where we Pilot Getaways readers fly. They have certainly earned my gratitude for preserving the flying destinations we love and creating new ones. To join or to contribute, contact the RAF at www.theraf.org.

John T. Kounis
Editor-in-Chief

