

Backcountry camping  
under the wing  
of a Kodiak 900 in  
Idaho's Nez Perce  
National Forest

# Wing It To the Wilderness

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Enterprising campers are turning to recreational pilots  
to take them even farther off the grid. Introducing aero camping,  
outdoor travel's final frontier

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hat’s a lot of scud,” Robert Miller said warily, looking at the dark and raggedy low-hanging clouds that obscured the granite peaks of the Bitterroot Mountains. Outside, the drumroll of rain intensified. As he peered through the cockpit window, it was becoming trickier by the second to spot a safe flight path from Montana to Idaho. Pilots hate scud.

Yet again, Mother Nature was challenging my attempt at an adventure few take on but many could: aero camping. In the early cabin-fever days of the pandemic, a former colleague posted about how she flew herself across America in a small aircraft to places you can’t normally reach by car—the kind of spots that enable you to take a deep breath and bask in the feeling of being truly away. Turns out there’s a whole community of pilots who fly to rural airstrips for the sole purpose of camping. That was what brought me here among the scud, looking to spend a night off the grid in the Nez Perce National Forest.

Aero camping is often as simple as landing on a tricky dirt airstrip and propping up a tent underneath a wing, but some locations have carefully maintained runways, restaurants and glamping-style tents to rent. My adventure was meant to land me somewhere in between.

After months of not leaving my block, I’d been hit hard by wanderlust. But getting away from people wouldn’t be easy—national parks got so crowded during the pandemic, the US Senate convened a subcommittee on it. Noncommercial pilots can’t take money from passengers, so the only way to aero camp is to have a plane and pilot’s license, or a friend with both. I can’t fly, so I got busy making friends with pilots.

This June, with the help of the Recreational Aviation Foundation (RAF), a nonprofit that maintains small US airstrips, and after heavy rains had canceled many attempts with Los Angeles-based pilots to reach Death Valley in California, I set my sights on Idaho. I hitched a last-minute ride out of Missoula, Montana, on a Kodiak 900, a beefy \$3.5 million backcountry aircraft made by Daher that just started deliveries this year. With a possible configuration of 10 seats, it’s roomier than the typical four-seat Cessnas most recreational flyers use, but it was still snug. And as the weeping clouds kept darkening our path, there was a growing chance we’d be turning around.

“It’s called recreational flying for a reason,” Tim Riley, another pilot, had told me. “We don’t fly in the rain if we don’t have to.”

Thanks to weather maps and the 160 years of collective flying experience among Miller and three other passengers (and maybe also due to my fervent prayers), we found a path. The scud even had an upside—one rainbow, then another, formed below us, leaving bands of color in our wake.

We were flying closer to the ground than I’d ever flown, through jutting mountains and valleys just greening with spring. This was it! Less than 30 minutes after taking off, we landed at the Moose Creek Ranger Station airstrip at the junction of the Selway River, deep into the Selway-Bitterroot Wilderness, 1.3 million protected acres shared between Idaho and Montana.

“This doesn’t suck, does it?” said the RAF’s president, Bill McGlynn, who’d helped book my trip, greeting us as we got off the plane.

Cedar, fir and spruce hemmed in the X-shaped, unpaved airstrip as a steady hum from nearby rushing waterways filled the air. McGlynn, who’s volunteered at Moose Creek for a decade, told me its airfield is 50 miles from the nearest lightbulb, at a ranger station in Lowell, Idaho, and 30 miles from the closest road. (Google Maps bears out the road distance; confirming the closest lightbulb is harder.)

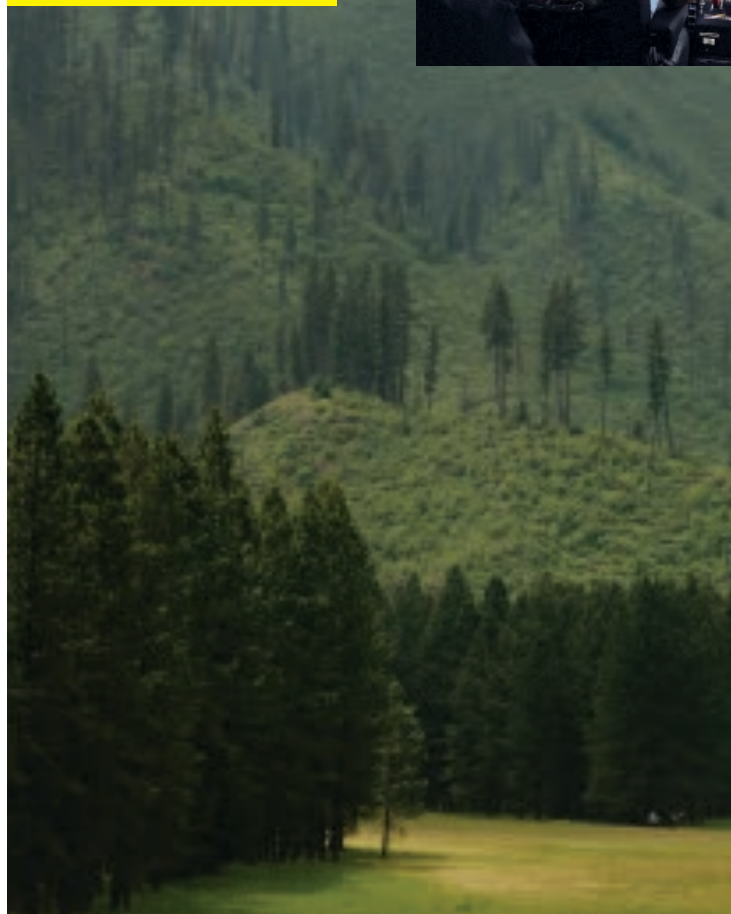
The only other ways to get to Moose Creek are rafting down the Selway or going on a multiday trek, but the airstrip, a beacon for backcountry pilots, is the most used way to arrive. People go there to hike, fish or fire up a little grill next to their ad hoc sky RV. Or—like me—they just want to get away from it all. We were the only plane there.

The US has about a half-million people with active pilot certification, according to the Federal Aviation Administration. But McGlynn says only about 35,000 to 40,000 of them do recreational flying. The first time many pilots try out aero camping is at AirVenture, an annual show put on by the Experimental Aircraft Association in Oshkosh, Wisconsin. More than 10,000 planes had been

Inside the Kodiak 900



A Cessna U206F Stationair taking off from the Moose Creek airfield





expected to arrive there from July 24 to 30, and last year about 50% of those who flew in camped, says Dick Knapinski, the EAA's director of communications. "We literally create a city of airplane camping," he says.

Other pilots come to aero camping—especially at the more backcountry locales—after getting bored with flying easy local laps and losing the appetite for getting what pilots call "a \$100 hamburger," slang for firing up the propellers to simply get lunch one town over. "They think, 'Been there, done that,'" McGlynn says. "'Now what do I do for an encore?'"

Some pilots also found themselves with time when work dried up, as it did in May 2020 for Filip Wolak and Sarah Tamar, the colleague who started my obsession. The friends took a two-week cross-country trip in *Rusty*, a 1973 Cessna 172M Skyhawk, removing the backseat to make room for supplies. "It was a merger of two loves—flying and camping," Tamar says.

Using Foreflight, a flight-planning app, they discovered airfields with pilot amenities, such as restrooms and even a spare car to run into town for supplies. "People were so excited to see pilots use their airstrips," Tamar says. Often, there isn't even a human on duty to alert about your arrival.

They slept in tents, stopping at airstrips in more than a dozen states,

including one in Stamford, Texas, where local pilots showed them a haunted house, and another in Moab, Utah, where they surveyed Bryce Canyon and Arches from on high. They were also able to fly in empty skies over the Grand Canyon, usually highly controlled airspace, because the numerous tourist flights had been grounded during the pandemic. Since sharing the trip on Wolak's professional photography site, they've become aero camping emissaries of sorts.

Backcountry flying is practiced almost exclusively in the US, though it's also done in Canada and Australia. The US has vast tracts of public land with airstrips carved out decades ago for access to resources or to fight wildfires that, combined with more permissive laws, allow pilots to fly almost anywhere. Many of those airstrips no longer serve their original purpose, but the RAF works with more than 300 operators to keep them open and free for any pilot. An online guide details each destination, including information on landing conditions. "The US has the best general aviation in the world," Tamar says. "People reach out from all over to experience it here."

While there are FAA-mandated annual inspections, and airplane fuel costs about a dollar more per gallon than car fuel (with emissions on par with those of an RV or smaller boat), flying isn't a prohibitively expensive hobby. For the price of "a moderately priced SUV, you can get into aviation," says Rodney Swanson, a recreational pilot, noting that used planes go for \$40,000 to \$80,000; a new Cessna Skyhawk 172 four-seater rings in at \$477,000. "Instead of golfing or gambling, this is what we do."

For pilots unused to flying through canyons with challenging wind conditions and landing on anything besides pavement, companies such as TacAero, based in Fredericksburg, Texas, can help. It offers 10 trainings a year (from \$3,500 for three to five days, and all with growing waitlists) to bring pilots into backcountry locations all over the country. "The type of flying we do is riskier than regular aviation," says TacAero director Ian Waghorn. Alaska is particularly popular, he says, calling it the final frontier of flying. "There are places where people have never landed a plane," he says, citing the state's raw backcountry and ample open areas: gravel bars, river beds, beaches and smooth-enough mountaintops.

For my trip, the rain cleared up about an hour after we shut the engines down, and bright skies remained for the afternoon, something Southern California hadn't offered in months. I went down to the river, where one of my crew had caught a rainbow trout fly-fishing. McGlynn showed me the ruts on the two airstrips, one almost 100 years old, that volunteers flying in the next day would fill in with dirt to make landings smoother. Besides a group of rafters camping down the river, it was just us, some scrambling deer and the wind.

As the sun set behind the mountain, a profound peace settled in. Before it got too dark, I set up my tent just off the airstrip. There were other, more private campsites among the trees, but even as I was trying to be in nature, I wanted my view to include our airplane. It had gotten me out here, after all, and I was as grateful for it as I was for the outdoors. **E**

