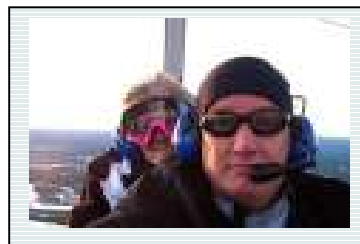


King for a Day

By Ben Deptula Courtesy of EAA

It was an absolutely beautiful fall day in Alaska's Interior. Blue sky as far as the eye could see! I jumped in my pickup truck and headed out to the airfield in North Pole. En route, I couldn't escape the feeling of excitement in anticipation of what the day had in store.

I arrived at the airfield and was met by fellow "air junkies" Steve Marquiss, Randy Echols, and Roger Ruess. Judging by the looks on their faces, I knew they had something big planned. I asked Randy where they were going. He said, "We're thinking of heading out to Gold King to check out Andrew Carrie's new cabin." Without hesitation, I said, "Count me in."



Gold King is located on a plateau situated against the rugged northern flanks of the Alaska Range. It sits approximately 300 feet above the valley floor and requires pilots to use extreme caution when taking off, or landing in windy conditions. However, the wind wasn't expected to be an issue, and the forecast was for light and variable all day. Simply put, the weather conditions were ideal for a trek into the mountains.



GOLD KING AIRPORT AHEAD

After preparing our trikes, I noticed that the others were already strapped in their aircraft with engines running. I started my AirBorne XT-912 and did the usual warm-up and systems check. I departed the tie-down area and followed the others out to the runway. Steve was the first to take off and was followed immediately after by Randy and Roger. It was like a mini-mass exodus of trikes departing in rapid succession into the wilds of Alaska – really cool stuff.

Finally, it was my turn to take off. I centered my trike on the gravel runway, accelerated to full power, and pushed the control bar all the way out. My trike leaped off the ground and ascended toward the heavens at a respectable 2,000 feet per minute.

Once airborne, we pointed our trikes southwest and headed for Clear Creek Butte. The butte is a highly visible landmark located deep within the Tanana Flats. As I approached it, I could see the other trikes ahead and lined up in tandem formation. Imagine clear blue skies, big white mountains, and three tiny trikes dotting the horizon – a very impressive sight to say the least.



ROGER EN ROUTE TO GOLD KING

As I flew over the northern edge of the butte, I looked down and saw something moving across the terrain. At first, I thought it might have been a moose. I reduced power and descended to a slightly lower altitude to get a better look. In addition, I made absolutely sure to keep my distance so I wouldn't alarm whatever was down there. Then, out of the corner of my eye, a giant grizzly bear appeared in the thick brush. It stood on its hind legs and looked up in my direction. I estimated that it was at least 8 feet tall. I had seen quite a few Grizzlies in the wild before but nothing quite as big as this one – it was huge! I said to myself, "This wouldn't be a good time for an engine out. I'm outta here!" I hand cranked the trimmer for maximum speed, hit the throttle hard, and didn't look back. My presence at Clear Creek Butte was history. With Clear Creek Butte left in my prop wash, I was off to the Wood River Butte, some 15 miles to the Southwest.



WOOD RIVER BUTTE

The Wood River Butte is the last prominent feature before hitting the Alaska Range. In flight, we were treated to smooth air and a million dollar view of the mountains, which included a rare close-up of North America's tallest peak, Mount McKinley. It was spectacular! I felt very fortunate that I was able to witness Alaska's pure raw beauty from the vantage point of my AirBorne XT-912. The rest of the way to the Wood River Butte was met with no surprises as we continued to navigate our trikes further south and deeper into the jaws of the Alaska Range.

Flying a trike in mountainous terrain can be a nerve-racking experience. If not done properly, it can have disastrous consequences. I make sure to pay close attention to wind direction and velocity before each flight out to the mountains. If the weather is favorable, I go for it. If not, I wait it out. Even though the wind wasn't a factor this day, I proceeded with extreme caution and was prepared to turn back at any moment.



ON FINAL APPROACH TO GOLD KING

As Gold King came into view, I noticed that it was immersed in beautiful fall foliage. Brilliant golds, yellows, oranges, and reds surrounded the plateau on which it sits—an amazing display of Mother Nature at her best.

With the runway in site, I turned onto final approach and saw that the others had already arrived and were parked at the west end of the airstrip. I made a smooth touchdown and taxied to the parking area, shut down the engine, and coasted to a complete stop. After securing my trike, I was met by my flying colleagues. All of them had huge grins on their faces. I have to admit I couldn't help but smile, myself; it felt good to be king for a day!



THE GUYS AT ANDREW CARRIE'S CABIN AT GOLD CREEK AIRPORT

GoldKingCreekAirport (PAAN) is a public airport owned by the state of Alaska. The airport directory reports the landing surface is rough unimproved gravel/dirt in poor condition with rocks up to 4 inches on the surface.

Ben Deptula is a certificated flight instructor who operates a flight school in Fairbanks, Alaska, specializing in sport pilot/weight shift control instruction. Check out his website at AirborneAlaska.net.