



2017 Site Improvement Project Buffalo Mountain

As a couple of P2s and a Hang 3 were enjoying the mild fall wonder winds above Heavener Runestone Park, local paragliding instructor Britton Shaw asked his student if he was ready for his first solo flight. Somewhat nervous, but confident, the student inflated his wing, turned, and stepped into a perfect breeze. After nearly an hour of soaring in the glass-smooth evening air, he safely landed in the wide-open grassy field below.

While hour-long first flights might not be the norm, perfect conditions in the beautiful Ouachita Mountains of southeast Oklahoma are. Pilots have been taking advantage of these towering ridges for more than four decades.

Buffalo Mountain Flyers (BMF) sprang into existence amid the great Oklahoma flying-site rush of 1975, when hang glider pilots from the surrounding region in Oklahoma, Arkansas, Texas, Louisiana, Missouri, and Kansas saw the potential of the Ouachita Mountains. A mass of pilots began converging on the new sites being flown and quickly recognized the need to organize, preserve, and protect the sites they had gained permission to fly.

In the fall of 1975, BMF became the organization for those flying from Buffalo Mountain. At 1200' above the valley floor near Talihina, Oklahoma, Buffalo consists of

by **DAVE SHAW and ROY MAHONEY**

five miles of smooth unbroken ridge that faces the area's predominant southerly winds. Heavener Runestone Hang Gliding Association (HRHGA) became the organization for those flying the Heavener site. Located on the western end of Poteau Mountain, overlooking Heavener, Oklahoma, its west-facing cliff above Heavener Runestone Park morphs into a SW-facing mile-long 800' AGL ridge with easy slope launch, which turns into a SSE-facing five-mile unbroken ridge, with yet another easy launch.

HRHGA eventually dissolved, and BMF became a USHPA chapter covering all sites in SE Oklahoma. Within 10 years, BMF added 1300' AGL east-facing Panorama Overlook on the beautiful, breathtaking Talimena Skyline Drive, Oklahoma's only National Scenic Byway. Through a Special Use Permit with the Forest Service, the club secured one of the most beautiful flying sites in the US. In more recent years, BMF added PG Point, another launch a little farther off Talimena Drive itself, but much closer to, and directly overlooking, the LZ. BMF's membership faded over the years from its peak of over 100 members in the '70s to less than 25 by the turn of the century. However, paragliding has sparked a resurgence in members, thanks to two local paragliding instructors, Ron



Mountain Flyers

Kohn and Britton Shaw, who support the club and train a large number of new and active pilots. BMF has continued to grow, topping 70 members during the last couple of years.

Securing and improving sites have been top-shelf priorities for the club. With the support of a growing member base, individual pilot/landowners, and assistance from the Foundation for Free Flight, BMF's projects to improve and preserve our flying sites have become larger in scale. Along with the 10-year SUP agreement between BMF and the Forest Service for both the launch and LZ at Panorama, the club, in conjunction with the Foundation, owns a permanent 40-acre easement for the LZ at Heavener. Privately, club members Ken Cobb and Barbara Hair (widow of the late Mel Hair) own three launch sites on Buffalo. Those same members, along with local instructor Ron Kohn, and club members Dave Ryhal and Dave Templeton, collectively own over 40 acres, most of which either were originally, or have been added to, the LZ.

With such a high degree of security, the club has aggressively pursued making the sites the best that they can be. During the 2016 annual membership meeting, the club developed a Site Improvement Plan and appointed club member Dave Shaw as project manager. Along with matching fund commitments from several pilots, the club designated an additional \$4000 for the project and ap-

plied for, and received, a \$5000 grant from the Foundation for Free Flight. The launches at Buffalo and PG Point were to be the main focus. In March 2017 work began on both sites.

Ken Cobb, owner of the eastern half of the launches on Buffalo, had 800 cubic yards of fill material hauled and



ABOVE Drone shot of the finished launch areas | photo by Miller Stroud. **TOP** April 15, 2017: Buffalo Mountain sod work day | photo by Jim Fuhrman.

spread on the east-slope launch and middle-bluff launch. He also plowed and removed several tons of rocks from the LZ, making it smooth enough to mow with a lawn mower. Ken spent the money from his own pocket and provided hundreds of hours of manual labor. A local contractor, D&D Ag Service, hauled topsoil to both the Buffalo and PG Point launches. The owner, a club member, donated the material and equipment, while the club agreed to pay for fuel. Over 120 cubic yards of topsoil were hauled and spread over shale at Buffalo, and over shale, rocks, and stumps at PG Point.

By April 15, the two launches were ready for sod. Thirty-plus club member volunteers put down 15,000 square feet of Bermuda sod. It was great seeing the rocky launches turned into what one member said would make an amaz-

ing golf green. Next, we needed to repair the washed-out access road to PG Point. D&D Ag Service donated the labor and equipment for this project, while the club purchased 100 cubic yards of crusher run, making the launch site accessible by nearly any vehicle. Finally, the club hired a dozer to build an access road below the Buffalo launches. The road allowed crews to apply herbicide for brush control and greatly improved access for emergency personnel in case of a blown launch or serious accident. To add icing to the cake, Ron Kohn, club member and webmaster, developed and implemented a QR program that integrates daily site check-in with waiver acknowledgement, membership status for both BMF and USHPA, with options to join if not currently a member, and appropriate warnings per pilot rating versus site requirements.



In all, the club used \$4000 in club funds, a \$5000 grant from the Foundation For Free Flight, and \$650 in club-member donations, earmarked for site improvements, for a total of \$9650. Cash expenditures were made for hauling, fuel, sod, seed, herbicide and watering. In addition to the cash, the following landowner and club member donations were made:

- *Ken Cobb: fill material at the Buffalo launch, \$14,505.

- *D&D Ag Service: labor & equipment, \$7829.

- *D&D Ag Service topsoil: \$3220.


- *Other club members: approximately 300 hours labor, valued at \$20/hr. for roughly \$6000.

- *Landowner labor: approximately 500 hours labor, valued at \$20/hr. for roughly \$10,000.

Total cash, plus donations of labor, equipment, and

material for this project totaled \$51,204.

We can't adequately express our appreciation to the Foundation for Free Flight and everyone else who contributed to this awesome project. It was amazing to witness everyone coming together for this effort. See the work as it was performed at PG Point in this great YouTube video put together by Britton Shaw: <https://youtu.be/f5FnwCONlcY>

We hope you will come to check out and fly our sites. Our annual BMF Fly-in Fundraiser is scheduled for June 30 through July 8, 2018. Registration begins in March 2018. You'll find the most current information at http://buffalo-mountainflyers.org/html/dynamic_flyin.html. 

BELOW *Sod work-day heroes | photo by Amy Tingle.*

