

**TOUGHER
THAN A
TORNADO**



**AOPA 2012
SWEEPSTAKES**

Hard work in wild places

RAF advocates for the backcountry

BY DAVE HIRSCHMAN

The story of the 2012 AOPA Sweepstakes “Tougher Than a Tornado” Husky begins with the Recreational Aviation Foundation (theraf.org), an organization that exists to expand access to the rugged, remote airstrips perfectly suited for such an airplane.

In fact, the Tornado Husky was the anchor of the RAF display at Sun 'n Fun on March 31, 2011, when a tornado struck. RAF members did everything they could to protect their display, but winds that exceeded 90 miles an hour pulled the airplane from its tie-downs and damaged the aircraft's fabric and control surfaces.

When the storm subsided, RAF President John McKenna nicknamed N40WY “tougher than a tornado” and suggested the airplane would be perfect for AOPA's annual sweepstakes. He saw the possibilities first and, in the RAF's char-

acteristically blunt, plain-spoken fashion, got busy making things happen.

“We in the RAF tend to say what's on our minds,” said McKenna, a Cessna 185 pilot and longtime resident of Bozeman, Montana. “Sometimes that helps us and sometimes it hurts us, but that's just the way it is. What you see is pretty much what you get.”

Founded by a group of Montana pilots in 2003, the RAF's leaders have discovered that pilots throughout the country, and around the world, share their desire to preserve and expand access to remote

airstrips, and volunteers from coast to coast are extremely willing and able to help. More than 3,000 people have joined the RAF, and the organization has joined forces with AOPA on legislative efforts that recognize the value of recreational flying and expand flying destinations.

Some notable successes include:

- Russian Flat Airstrip in Montana, a grass runway on U.S. Forest Service land that opened last year to public use with a great deal of sweat equity from RAF members.
- Ryan Field on the western edge of Glacier National Park was donated to the RAF by owners Ben and Butchie Ryan so



Plus — View the video.

that it remains an airfield forever. Ryan Field is open to the public now, and the RAF supplies a courtesy car for visits to the nearby park.

- Winning a court fight with help from the Montana Pilots Association to preserve several backcountry airstrips in the Missouri River Breaks National Monument area that environmental groups had sought to shut down.

- Fort Kent Airfield in northern Maine also is scheduled to reopen to the public, thanks to help from the RAF in conjunction with local pilots.

The RAF also spearheads state legislative efforts across the country to protect owners of private airfields from lawsuits through “recreational use” statutes and encourages airstrip owners to open their facilities to visiting pilots. Arizona, New Mexico, Idaho, Montana, Tennessee, Pennsylvania, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, and Maine now list aviation as a recreational activity similar to hik-

ing, hunting, fishing, or snowmobiling, a definition that gives landowners greater liability protection and makes it more likely for them to allow public use of private airstrips in rural areas.

The RAF is actively promoting recreational-use statutes for aviation and, with AOPA backing, hopes to enact them in all 50 states.

But as much as anything else, the RAF is about action. Members take part in the vigorous outdoor activities that flying to remote places makes possible. And whether they're fishing, hiking, hunting, rafting—or doing the hard, unglamorous work of mending fences, smoothing turf runways, or digging latrines—RAF members go about their tasks with a fun-loving, can-do spirit.

During a summer “work party” at Schafer Meadows, a picturesque turf airfield high in the Rocky Mountains of extreme northwestern Montana, RAF volunteers joined members of state pilots

associations and backcountry flying enthusiasts to prepare the beloved place for the summer flying season.

They braved swarms of mosquitoes and late-afternoon rain squalls, drove off a curious black bear, and contributed hundreds of hours of free labor getting the airfield ready after it had been buried under many feet of snow for months. And the worse weather conditions got, the more the 50 volunteers seemed to savor the experience and appreciate each other's company.

They also hiked on the steep trails surrounding their wilderness location, fished in the icy river and crystal clear lakes, grilled steaks, and told stories around campfires each night.

“We all appreciate the rare gift we've been given of having magnificent locations like this that we can fly to in our own airplanes,” McKenna said at the time. “We want our kids and grandkids to be able to do the same things. It's more than just a

Backcountry pilots work hard to preserve access to airstrips—but it's not all sweat and toil. Food, drinks, and storytelling are part of an outing at Schafer Meadows in western Montana.



hobby. It's a way of life—and the truth is that we have an absolute blast when we get out here. It's just a lot of damn fun.”

Greg Pecoraro, AOPA vice president for airports and state advocacy, says the RAF stands out among aviation groups for the commitment of its members, and its ability to accomplish difficult, complex, long-term goals.

“The RAF’s passion for backcountry airstrips is remarkable,” Pecoraro said. “They bring together volunteers who provide political advocacy as well as the actual physical work of doing repairs and improvements in remote locations. They’re extremely effective in both areas.”

Mike Ferguson, AOPA’s regional representative for the Northwest, is an RAF member and participates in a wide variety of activities that promote backcountry flying. Ferguson flies a Bonanza that he takes to remote grass strips and high-altitude airports that would seem off limits to all but specialized airplanes such as Hus-



Remote airstrips allow outdoor adventures like rafting (left), but the RAF is active at busy airports, too. The Tornado Husky on display (below) at Bozeman’s “pilot shelter,” a facility that allows pilots and their passengers to pitch tents on overnight stays.



kys and Super Cubs. He says combining the expert AOPA staff with the energy of the highly focused RAF is good for both organizations.

“AOPA has been extremely helpful in opening doors in Washington, D.C., and elsewhere,” he said. “That’s a tremendous benefit for the RAF. And the RAF’s efforts to promote backcountry flying, in turn, are good for general aviation.”

Too perfect

The repaired Tornado Husky was reunited with the RAF during a summer trip to western Montana. Several of the Montana pilots had been at Sun ’n Fun during the violent weather that nearly claimed the Husky.

Dan Prill, an RAF vice president, was with the airplane before and after it returned to the Aviat Aircraft factory for repairs, and he expressed some disappointment at the immaculate finished product. He couldn’t find the former gash in the fuselage, and the previously mismatched colors on the control surfaces had been repaired.

“The repairs are too perfect,” he said dismissively. “You should have let the

Tornado Husky keep its battle scars. They gave the airplane more character.”

Flying with the RAF

The Tornado Husky was the centerpiece of an RAF barbeque at Gallatin Field (BZN) in Bozeman where the RAF has built a “pilot shelter.” The peaked stone-and-wood structure contains sparkling bathrooms and showers as well as picnic tables, electrical outlets, airplane tiedowns, and a grassy area where visiting pilots and their passengers can pitch tents on overnight visits.

We flew northwest to Schafer Meadows (8U2), a U.S. Forest Service strip in the northwest part of the state that’s become a favorite destination for the RAF, the Montana Pilots Association, and backcountry fliers throughout the region. Along the way, we flew between towering peaks that stay snowy all year long, overflow shimmering mountain lakes, and sped along the “Chinese Wall,” a massive rock formation that juts dramatically from the high, uneven ground and is reminiscent of the Great Wall.

Landing at Schafer Meadows, the Husky joined about two dozen airplanes



and twice that many volunteers who were already hard at work making airfield improvements.

The next morning, a Sunday, the work party finished its tasks, and Schafer Meadows was in great shape to begin another flying season. In an era of shrinking government budgets, the cost of the airfield improvements to the U.S. Forest Service and area taxpayers for all the work at Schafer Meadows was zero. All of the labor had been donated by pilots and fly-in volunteers who had only sore backs and calluses on their hands to show for it. Yet the location as well as the volunteers themselves seemed rejuvenated by the effort.

A heavy blanket of fog left over from the previous evening's rain cleared out around noon, and the airplanes took to the sky again at irregular intervals, following the valley as they climbed. On the multicom frequency, pilots reported clear skies in all directions and headed for home.

The Tornado Husky's next stop was Ryan Field. Ringed by towering pines, the remote strip was built slowly on their 156-acre property over many years. It was recently donated to the RAF, and volunteers are determined to make the airstrip visited by grizzly bears, deer, antelope, moose, and elk a favorite for fly-in visitors to adjoining Glacier National Park.

Flying in and out of each mountain airstrip can be tricky. Both Schafer Meadows and Ryan Field have steep uphill and downhill grades and tall obstructions, and the wind, weather, and density altitudes change dramatically—and quickly. But rather than regarding those characteristics as drawbacks, RAF members embrace the difficulties in a clear-eyed, matter-of-fact way.

"This kind of flying is demanding, and that's part of why we love it so much," McKenna said. "A lot of work goes on behind the scenes to make it all possible. The work itself isn't easy, but that's OK with us. Nothing worthwhile ever is."

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