

EPIC FLIGHT



NATURAL WONDER

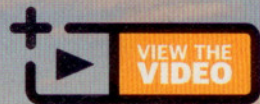
Flying the Husky in its habitat

A heavy coat of morning dew beads on the windshield of the AOPA 2012 Sweepstakes Tougher Than a Tornado Husky.

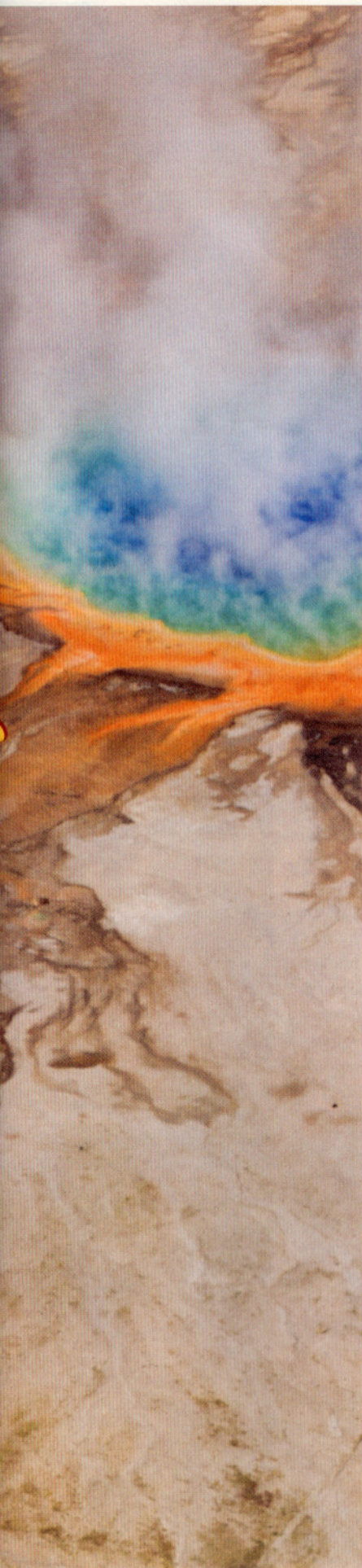
It's been tied down overnight on a grassy lawn at Alpine Airport (46U) in western Wyoming, waiting for first light to begin a 160-nm northerly flight past the towering granite peaks of Grand Teton National Park, over volcanic Yellowstone National Park, and then to our destination at Gallatin Field Airport in Bozeman, Montana.

BY DAVE HIRSCHMAN
PHOTOGRAPHY BY MIKE FIZER









Wet grass and soft ground make it easy to pull up the tiedown stakes, and within minutes, the equipment is loaded into the Husky's rear baggage compartment along with a backpack, tent, sleeping bag, dried food, water, and assorted camping gear.

The gleaming airplane that had been roughed up by the 2011 Sun 'n Fun tornado, then repaired at the Aviat factory in nearby Afton, Wyoming, was finally about to begin the kind of rigorous mountain flying its designers envisioned: vaulting over the Rockies; descending into glacial valleys; and taking off and landing at remote, rugged, high-altitude airstrips.

AOPA Senior Photographer Mike Fizer and *Pilot Getaways* magazine founder John Kounis are teaming up in Kounis's Cessna 185, and this flight is an aerial photo session as well as a cross-country trip. Kounis, an accomplished formation pilot, sits in the right seat of his Cessna, allowing Fizer to shoot out the left side.

We taxi to Alpine's Runway 31 as the first rays of dawn brighten the peaks to our east and golden shafts of light begin to penetrate the shadowy Snake River Canyon.

There's no wind on the surface as I add full power and take off toward the Pinnacle Reservoir, a man-made,

blue-water lake that begins a few feet beyond the departure end of the nearly 6,000-foot runway. Even at an elevation of 5,634 feet, the fully fueled Tornado Husky accelerates briskly and climbs like a mountain goat. The speed (70 KIAS) isn't fast, but the gradient is impressive.

Kounis takes off moments later and joins on my right wing as we head toward the canyon. I shallow the climb angle to better accommodate the faster Cessna, and Fizer is already at work with a camera pointed out the Skywagon's open left window.

The wind at altitude is from the southwest, and we ride through some light chop as we climb above the curving, rushing, boulder-strewn river. The canyon walls are narrow at first, but they become wider and appear to drop away as we gain altitude and turn north toward Jackson, Wyoming.

The top of the Class D airspace at Jackson Hole Airport (JAC) is 8,900 feet msl, and we're well above it as we approach from the southeast. Kounis takes the lead and calls ATC to make sure there are no traffic conflicts with the corporate jets and airliners for which Jackson is such a popular destination.

The cabin feels frosty as we continue our ascent. My gaze is fixed on

FLYING STORIES are shared around a fire at Alpine, Wyoming (above) the night before flying over Yellowstone National Park (left).

TURNING FINAL over Pinnacle Reservoir in Wyoming for landing at Alpine Air Park (46U).



the lead airplane, but I can't help sneaking glimpses of the iconic, craggy outline of Grand Teton and its phalanx of ice-encrusted sentries straight ahead. They grow to fill the windshield and become ever richer in detail as we approach.

We're flying at 11,500 feet msl, about 2,200 feet below the tallest peak. The Tornado Husky's normally aspirated Lycoming O-360 is at full power yet registers only 18 inches of manifold pressure in the thin air. It's capable of climbing much higher (the service ceiling is 20,000 feet), but flying next to another airplane, it's soon apparent that the instantaneous acceleration and deceleration that characterizes its performance at low altitude are long gone.

"Expect some bumps as we get closer to the mountains," Kounis warns as we continue flying west toward the peaks now glowing in the low morning light.

Moments later, our airplanes are buffeted by light but continuous chop from the swirling wind's collision with the mountaintops. We circle nearby, and I do my best to follow Fizer's hand signals to position the Tornado Husky higher or lower, forward or aft, left or right for the optimum sun angles and backgrounds. And each time our airplanes point toward the mountains, I consciously fight the siren's song and resist letting my eyes become drawn to them.

After a time, we swap leads, a welcome change that allows me to stare outside and take in the magnificence of the natural wonders around us. At the foot of the peaks, placid, crystal-clear lakes reflect the mountains' stunning beauty like oversized mirrors. I jabber away on our air-to-air radio frequency pointing out marvels that my fellow travelers have been admiring for the last 30 minutes.

Next, we fly north to Yellowstone and appreciate the vastness and fragility of our surroundings—and the tremendous vision and foresight of the people who protected them so selflessly for current and future generations. We descend to 10,000 feet msl (about 3,000 feet agl), and what looks like snow on a high plateau beneath us reveals itself to be a huge field of calcium carbonate, a by product of the ancient and ongoing geothermal activity.

Ahead, what looks like a score of campfires, on closer inspection, turns out to be steam from Yellowstone's geysers—the largest concentration of them anywhere in the world. On this cool, still morning, the steam is thick enough to create dense fog in some of the river valleys.

We overfly the Shoshone Geyser Basin, Midway Geyser Basin, and Grand Prismatic Spring. Outlandishly vibrant colors ringing the 300-foot wide pool at the spring make the Tornado Husky's attention-getting paint seem subdued by comparison.







Following the Yellowstone River, we continue northwest into Montana, where the valleys are a lush green. Trees that are standing look healthy and plentiful, but a matchstick carpet of charred trunks is scattered among them, remnants of the massive fires that blackened almost 800,000 acres in this area in 1988.

Weaving our way up the river valley toward Gardiner, Montana, the peaks on both sides rise several thousand feet above us. But we needn't climb any higher. The Bozeman Pass soon comes into view to our left, and we follow it west to Gallatin Field.

Kounis and Fizer land first and I listen in on the tower frequency as they get directions to the "pilot shelter" that the Recreational Aviation Foundation (RAF) has built at the airport. The gleaming facility has restrooms and showers, a tiedown area, and campsites.

The tower-controlled airport with regular airline service also has a grass runway perfect for the Tornado Husky parallel to its main runway, and

it's offset far enough to allow parallel approaches in VFR conditions.

After landing, I taxi to the pilot shelter and position the Tornado Husky on the grass. RAF President John McKenna is hosting a barbecue dinner at the shelter tonight, and the Tornado Husky is sure to draw attention from Montana pilots who appreciate its specialized capabilities so well suited to flying in this region.

As soon as the airplane is secure, however, rain begins falling and towering cumulus clouds appear to the west. The Tornado Husky—living up to its name—seems to attract wild weather wherever it goes. Fortunately, McKenna has space in his hangar, and the airplane gets safely tucked inside.

We flew the Husky to remote locations that put the airplane to much more difficult tests than today's cross-country flight. But our sightseeing trip above some of the crown jewels of our country's national park system is an experience to savor.

AOPA

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LAST CHANCE

Remember, you have until August 31, 2012, to renew your membership for a chance to win this rugged, versatile aircraft (www.aopa.org/sweeps).

BAKER VAIL

A WHIRLWIND YEAR IN THE TORNADO HUSKY

As the time to hand over the keys to the AOPA 2012 Sweepstakes Tougher Than a Tornado Husky approaches, I'd like to express my gratitude for 12 months of unforgettable adventures in this magnificent airplane.

During the year since the Tornado Husky, then bruised and tattered, first came to AOPA headquarters in Frederick, Maryland, it's brought us to some amazing places and introduced us to some terrific people: Afton, Wyoming, where the Aviat Aircraft craftsmen who originally built the Tornado Husky returned it to as-new condition; Ryan Field near Glacier National Park, where the Recreational Aviation Foundation revived a donated backcountry strip in the rugged Rocky Mountains of Montana; coastal Maine in autumn, where we camped under the wings; and Key West, Florida, where we skimmed above coral reefs.

It has overflowed Acadia, Everglades, Grand Teton, and Yellowstone national parks; the Chesapeake Bay; New York Harbor; and the Continental Divide. It's inspired a wounded U.S. Marine, Adam Kisielewski, to become a pilot, and

carried my mom, Wilma Melville, over the Statue of Liberty where she spread her late husband's ashes at a place that well represented his remarkable life.

Everywhere its oversized tires touch down, the Tornado Husky brings the excitement of aerial adventures. That message resonates with AOPA members who visited the Tornado Husky at events such as AOPA Summit, Sun 'n Fun, and EAA AirVenture.

The Tornado Husky has benefited from generous sponsors, including XM Satellite Weather for its Garmin GPSMAP 696, a Rosen Sunvisor, and a protective canvas cover (with the Tornado Husky logo!) from Bruce's Custom Covers. The airplane has flown about 120 hours in the past 12 months, and its final AOPA trip will be to AOPA Summit in Palm Springs, California, October 11 to 13, where it will be awarded to its winner.

If there are tears in my eyes at the parting, they'll be tears of joy, for I can anticipate some of the life-changing experiences that the pilots who will guide this young airplane and their passengers can have on their own flights of wonder. —DH



NOVEMBER 2011
> With my mom, Wilma Melville



APRIL 2011
> 2011 Sun 'n Fun Fly-In



MAY 2012

> Adam Kisielewski, new pilot



SEPTEMBER 2011

> Flying over New York Harbor



OCTOBER 2011

> Touring the Maine coast



JULY 2011

> Backcountry flying



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