

# Local paraglider first to traverse Hells Canyon

By Steve Tool

Wallowa County Chieftain

Paragliding skill and just the right weather helped local part-time resident Todd Weigand become the first person to fly over Hells Canyon in a wind-powered device. Weigand is a professional paraglider who owns several paragliding companies and resides part-time in the Wallowa Valley.

Weigand made the 82-mile flight on July 31 starting from the top of Mt. Howard. The record was no accident for Weigand. "The day before, the weather forecast was looking really good for high cloud base for good thermals and good wind direction toward Idaho. "We probably have to understand air more than any other air-user pilot in the world," Weigand said. Later that day, Weigand flew across the Snake River to Oxbow Dam, camped out and hitched a ride back to Joseph, arriving at noon on July 31.

After a quick lunch and checking the forecast, Weigand correctly determined a record-breaking flight could be his for the taking. He boarded the tram to the top of Mt. Howard,

launching at 2 p.m., flying directly east for the next 4.5 hours, reaching heights of up to 17,999 feet for the flight.

The enormous height was required because Hells Canyon generally lacks thermals, an upward current of warm air paragliders use to maintain height. "You get as high as you can because all the way across, you're sinking, and (the canyon) is trying to suck you in," Weigand said.

In a stroke of good fortune, Weigand landed on a little strip on Mackay Bar at the confluence of the South Salmon and Main Salmon rivers. "I landed next to this river camp with all the people running over while cheering and screaming," Weigand said.

One of the campers, Joe Ehrler, of Joseph, knew Weigand from the paragliding lessons his daughter had taken from him. "I ended up just being able to jump on his raft and float out over the next two days until we hit the first road, and I rode with him all of the way to Joseph," Weigand said.

As well as the first record-breaking flight over the canyon, it was also the first flight up the main fork of the Salmon River.



Courtesy photo/Todd Weigand

Just another selfie at 15,000-foot-plus altitude. Todd Weigand, well on the way to his record-breaking flight from Mt. Howard to Mackay Bar, Idaho.

Of course, Weigand takes safety precautions. He carries a radio, a variometer, which is a device that tracks ascent and descent, as well as a satellite tracker that sends out signals as to his location. A pack carries his sleeping

bag, food and safety equipment. He also carries an emergency parachute.

Weigand returned to this area for the first time in nearly a decade, hoping to establish a tandem paragliding school. He intends to spend

plenty of airtime here over the summer. "I'll be flying all summer long, there's lots of good sites in the area, over Imnaha, places by Elk Mountain and Joseph Canyon. I'm looking forward to it," Weigand said.

## Elk Initiative celebrates 25 years

The Blue Mountains Elk Initiative (BMEI) celebrated 25 years with a two-day celebration in Pendleton earlier this month.

The BMEI is the longest-running initiative of its kind. It represents the partnerships between federal, state, private landowners and industries, Tribal Nations, the Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation, and other sportsmen's organizations and conservation groups.

The mutual goal of all agencies involved is to improve habitat for elk and other wildlife across the Blue Mountains of northeast Oregon and southeast Washington.

Nearly 10 million dollars have been leveraged since 1990 for habitat improvement, conservation education and research.

Current issues facing elk in the Blue Mountains include: poor elk distribution, low calf recruitment (survival) and invasive weeds that quickly overtake large areas, rendering them unusable for elk and many other native wildlife species. More information is available at [www.fs.fed.us/pnw/](http://www.fs.fed.us/pnw/)

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## Multitudes attend blues festival

By Steve Tool  
Wallowa County Chieftain

It's a long way from the Mississippi Delta to Wallowa County, but the blues made its 19th yearly journey nonetheless. Five blues bands, bronzes from Parks Bronze and about 40 different beers also journeyed to the Bronze, Blues and Brews Festival held Aug. 7-8 at Joseph City Park.

A larger-than-average audience attended the opening

night's blues jam, held for the first time at the park, on the evening of Aug. 7. Several of the bands joined together for a high-energy jam that lasted for several hours during the balmy evening. The beer garden was open with offerings from several breweries to quench the thirst of revelers.

The main festival on Aug. 8 opened with promising weather and the stylings of Ben Rice and Lucy Hammond. "Polly O'Keary and the Rhythm Method" followed with a high-energy set that included O'Keary jumping off the stage to mingle and play bass with a very appreciative audience. "Roseland Hunter"



Steve Tool/Chieftain

Cyril Neville, bandleader as well as lead vocalist for headliners "Royal Southern Brotherhood" belts out his own special brand of blues during the finale of the Bronze Blues and Brews Festival on Aug. 8

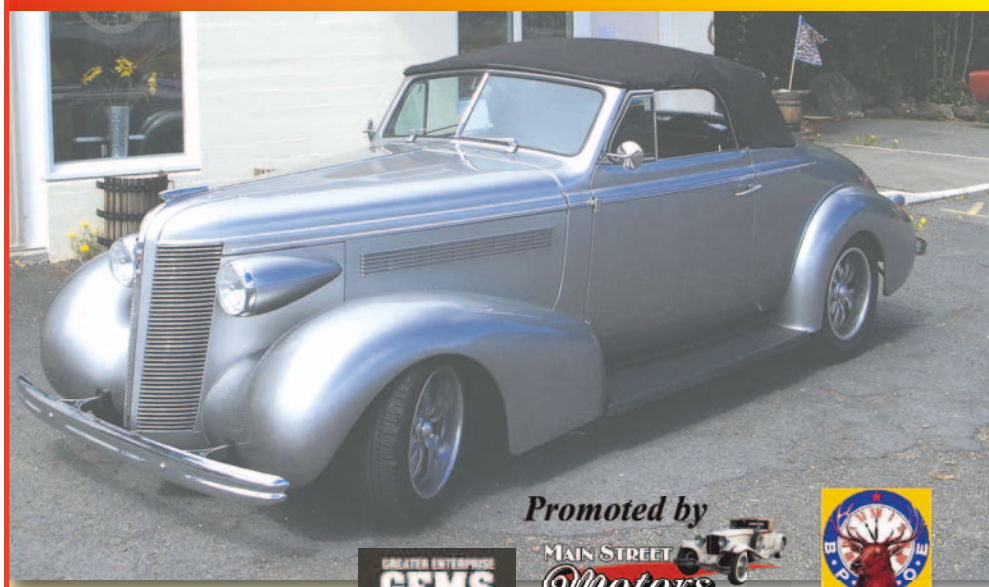
followed, playing their stellar Portland interpretation of New Orleans funk.

Second to the headliners came the "Sultans of Slide" featuring, you guessed it — slide guitar. The band has three capable slide players who played a number of standards as well as original tunes well into the evening.

Threatening clouds gathered as headliners "Royal Southern Brotherhood" took to the stage, but the few minutes of rain failed to dampen the spirits of most of the crowd as the band, led by vocalist and second-line percussionist, Cyril Neville, and lead guitarist Buddy Walker blazed their way through the hottest set of the night with much of the crowd on their feet and dancing through the set. The blistering set proved RSB is not considered one of the top U.S. blues bands for nothing.

After the closing number, it's doubtful anyone went home without thinking they'd gotten their money's worth and then some for the weekend.

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