

'Odd Couple'
on stage at
BMCC/3C



Doolittle
day at
airport/2C



'Premium
hunts'
return/8C

EYE IN THE SKY

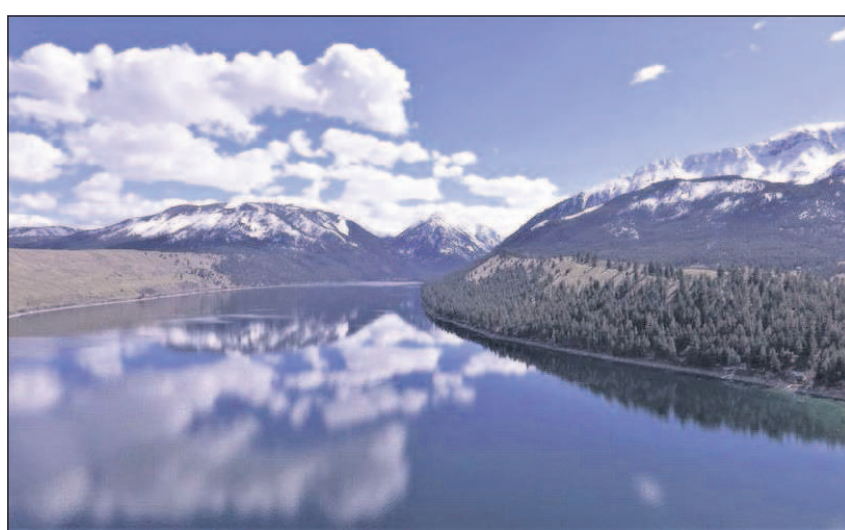
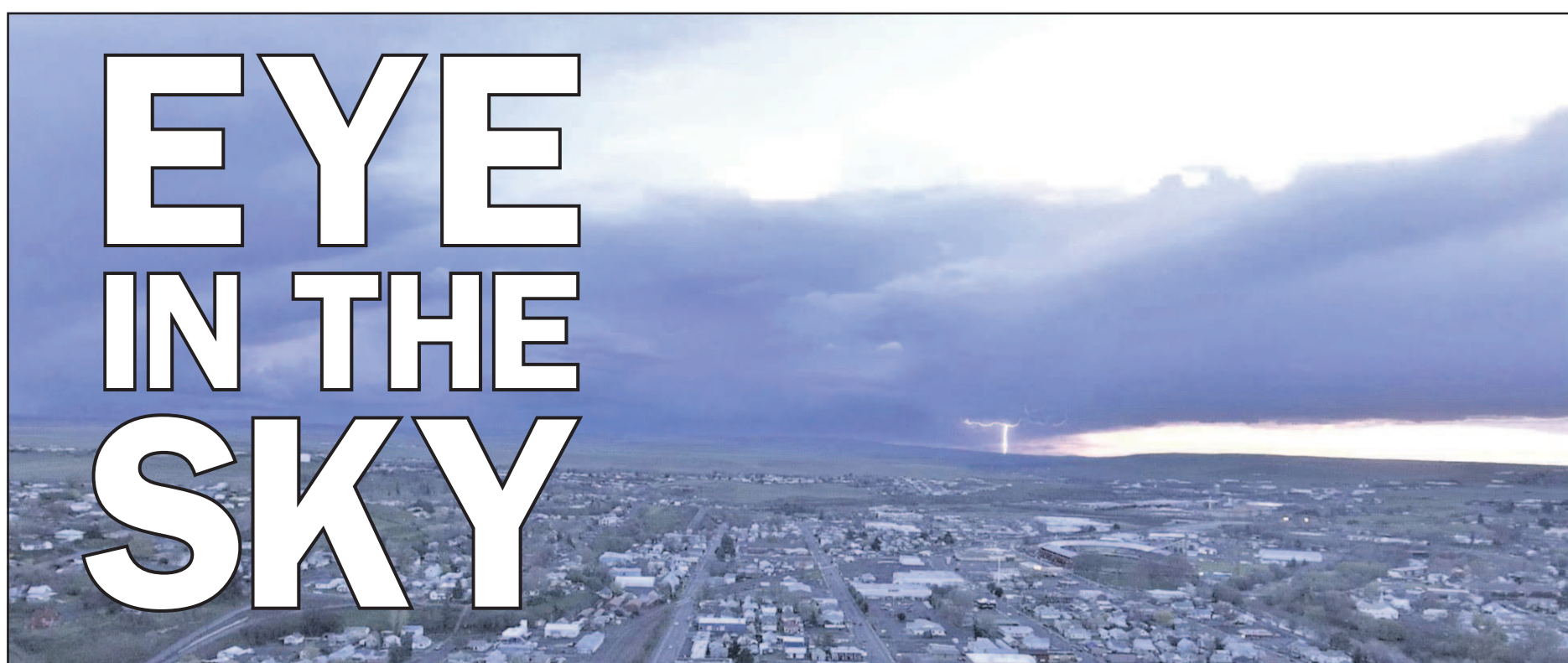


Photo by James Thomas

LEFT: James Thomas, of Hermiston, flies his drone near Hat Rock, using an iPad to track direction, speed, elevation and operate the drone's camera. **RIGHT AND ABOVE:** These photos of Wallowa County and a thunderstorm over Pendleton were taken from the air by James Thomas using a Phantom 4 drone.

Photo, tech hobbyist uses drone to get a new angle on scenery

By **PHIL WRIGHT**
East Oregonian

The drone hovered a few feet off the ground, sounding like a small swarm of bees. Cows on the grassy pasture nearby paid it no mind.

James Thomas of Hermiston sent his four-bladed DJI Phantom 4 Pro soaring. Seconds later it disappeared from sight somewhere above Hat Rock State Park on the Columbia River.

"It practically flies itself," he said. "It's a very smart drone."

The contraption would fit in a plastic milk crate.

Thomas, 25, operated the drone with left and right joysticks on a hand-held console, akin to a video game controller. He connected an iPad tablet that displays images from the drone's ultra-definition camera as well as flight information, including speed and altitude.

The manufacturer advises a top speed of 45 mph, he said, but with a tailwind he has seen it reach 55.

The signal from the console is good within three miles, he said, and a pair of antenna attachments boosted the distance to five. Still, he held off flying the \$1,000 device all the way to the Washington side of the river.

"Since we're so close to the Columbia, with the weather, I'm kind of scared to do it," he said.

Thomas also said he flies it no higher than 400 feet, the Federal Aviation Administration's ceiling on recreational drone use. He paid \$25 to register the drone with the agency.

He said two years ago he saw a drone in action and "thought it was so cool." This year he convinced his girlfriend, Mariah Rincker, 25, of Hermiston, to buy the Phantom 4 with her tax return, with the promise he would pay her back.

"He loves it," she said. "It's crazy how much stuff he's done with it already."

He has had the drone for about eight weeks. They planned to visit his family in his hometown of Lebanon, Oregon, the same day the drone was to arrive.

"I simply refused to leave until this thing came in the mail," he said.

His interest in flying, however, sprouted years before.

"My stepdad was a pilot, so I love seeing things from the air," he said, which even grew into him flying for the Civil Air Patrol.

Thomas also said he was "big into photography" in high school, and the drone allows him to pursue that as well. He said he used the drone to shoot video of the Umatilla River flooding in Hermiston, which he gave to a Tri-Cities TV news station.

Thomas works at the Hermiston Wal-Mart Distribution Center. On his days off, he said, he, Rincker and her 2-year-old son "try to go somewhere cool that has nice scenery." Their best trip yet was April

21 to Wallowa Lake, where he took photos of mountain clouds reflecting off the high lake's placid waters. He said his sister picked one image for her birthday present.

He recalled he crashed the drone into a tree on an early flight and lost the drone on Hermiston Butte when "something went crazy with it." His best guess was interference from the communication towers.

Their visit to the wind farm at Finley Buttes did not pan out. Rincker said they found signs prohibiting drones. And the airport at Joseph, Thomas said, has a "huge no fly zone" that

prevented the drone from working.

He has flown at the Eastern Oregon Regional Airport, Pendleton, he said, which requires calling the tower operator for permission. While at the Hermiston Municipal Airport, he has to keep an eye out for LifeFlight aircraft.

His biggest fear of flying, though, is hitting a bird. He also said eagles are a concern because they have attacked drones.

Rincker credited the drone with getting them outdoors but said she has yet to fly the drone. Thomas said when his girlfriend tried, the weather soured.

Thomas added they are looking at flying over the Painted Hills and Hell's Canyon. And he just might fly it this weekend over Hermiston, he said, to take in the big Cinco de Mayo celebration.

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Staff photo by Kathy Aney

James Thomas of Hermiston packs away his new drone, which fits in a hard styrofoam container.



Staff photo by Kathy Aney

James Thomas flies his drone near Hat Rock.



Staff photo by Kathy Aney

James Thomas keeps an extra battery in reserve to power his Phantom 4 drone for up to 22 minutes of flight time. The drone is designed to return to the user before the battery dies.