

# GENERAL AVIATION NEWS

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## The big picture

*LightHawk pilots help save the environment*

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# The big picture

## LightHawk volunteer pilots protect the environment

By JANICE WOOD

Ever wonder what would happen if more people could see what we see?

That's the question the folks at LightHawk pose to pilots during recruiting efforts for the non-profit organization. The question is central to LightHawk's mission, which is "to champion environmental protection through the unique perspective of flight."

"We have a way to show other people what we have been seeing for years," says Greg Bedinger, LightHawk's pilot outreach manager. "Sharing what we have seen is a powerful tool. We can post videos and photos online, but it is only a substitute for the real images that you see first hand."

Missions for LightHawk's volunteer pilots range from flying over strip mines to flights over the Gulf of Mexico after the massive BP oil spill to flights over areas ravaged by hurricanes. Passengers on the flights range from photographers to

government officials, policy makers, researchers, and more. "We get people up in the air who will benefit from seeing things in a different way," Bedinger says.

"The view from above allows you to see the land in its oneness and its interconnectedness," says Bill Carey, a county commissioner in Missoula, Montana, on LightHawk's website. "Everything down there — the hills and the draws, the rivers and the lakes — are all part of a whole. We tend to forget that. The flight strengthened my resolve to be the best possible steward of this truly remarkable part of the world."

That is exactly the reaction LightHawk treasures. "We all love it when our passengers get out of the plane and say, 'I had no idea,'" Bedinger says. "It can be transformative at its best, although the images can take some time to sink in."

LightHawk partners with a number of conservation groups in North America and Latin America. A flight will often include a member of one of these groups tasked with explaining the environmental issues or concerns to a policy maker. Many of the flights are photography flights and volunteer pilots also have taken documentary crews up to aid in telling their stories. Just recently, LightHawk pilots began transporting endangered animals to safe habitats (see additional story on page 19).

The variety of missions is endless and the group is always looking for more volunteer pilots. Volunteers must have at least 1,000 hours PIC time. "That's substantially higher than other groups," Bedinger acknowledges. "We are looking for pilots who have a wide range of flight experience."

One reason is that more experienced pilots are better at making judgment calls about when not to fly, he notes. "There is nothing critical about a LightHawk flight. Flights can always be rescheduled. There is no reason to push it as we aren't transporting patients who are on life support."

The organization is looking for pilots who are skilled enough to handle all types of flying, from mountains to coastlines, and who are able to slow the plane enough to safely position photographers to get the best possible shots to document an oil spill, strip mining, deforestation, or any other environmental concern.

There is no limit on the aircraft used for LightHawk missions, as long as they have standard airworthiness certificates. In fact, pilots can even fly Light-Sport Aircraft, Bedinger says. "However, this limits it to just one passenger, so they could be used in photography flights — and we do a lot of photography missions," he notes.

But to accomplish the primary mission of getting decision-makers up in the air to see the big picture, a four-place — or more — is needed, so there's room for the official (or officials), a representative from a conservation group to explain what it is they are seeing, and the pilot. "We like to have a guide or somebody who is knowledgeable about the issue so the pilot can concentrate on flying," he says.

The flights sometimes will include representatives from both sides of an issue to present their cases to the officials, he notes. And it's not uncommon to have officials who have never flown in a general aviation aircraft before, he adds.

### DO YOU HAVE THE RIGHT STUFF?

Pilots interested in volunteering for LightHawk go through a rigorous screening process. It begins with a pre-application telephone interview with one of the organization's four program managers that lasts about 30 minutes. "This helps us elicit their approach to safety," Bedinger explains. "It helps us see their level of professionalism and to see if they are cautious."

If there are no red flags, the next step is the application. An important part of this process is references, he says. They are obviously looking for aviation-related references and the pilot's CFI is one of those who will be called. "We want to know how often they do recurrent training and their attitude," he says.

They also want to talk with someone who is aware of the pilot's interest in conservation, he notes. "We want to get a sense of whether they'll be a good fit."

If the pilot is a good fit, next is an orientation interview with Bedinger, another

**"Most pilots want to do something — they want to contribute. They want to make the world a better place."**

— LightHawk's Greg Bedinger



LightHawk's Greg Bedinger (left) and volunteer pilot Bob Keller were at this year's AOPA Aviation Summit recruiting new volunteer pilots.



A LightHawk volunteer pilot's Cessna 182 provides an aerial view of a gas well near Wyoming's Red Desert.

program manager, and a current volunteer pilot. "We go through procedures and safety issues, how to give a safety briefing, weather, and terrain," he says.

LightHawk has about 200 volunteer pilots. Most are over 40 years old, with many retired airline or air taxi pilots who are "good at flying under pressure," Bedinger says.

They also have the free time to fly for the volunteer organization and most own their own aircraft. "Some rent and some are in flying clubs," he notes.

The organization also operates its own aircraft and pays for the fuel and operating costs of these, with volunteer pilots flying them for one- to two-week assignments. Pilots who fly their own aircraft are able to deduct some of the expenses, LightHawk officials say, noting the amount of the deductions varies.

With so many organizations looking for volunteer pilots, why should a pilot choose LightHawk?

"It's really a personal preference," Bedinger says. "It depends on the type of flying you like to do and what your experience is. All organizations try to encourage pilots to follow their hearts and find the niche that they love. Some pilots love mountain flying, while others love float flying, and still others like cross-country flying.

"LightHawk flights are not about Point

A to Point B," he continues. "We start out at Point A and look at an issue, and then go back to Point A."

All flights are VFR, he says, noting, "We are showing something from the air. There's no benefit if there are marginal weather conditions."

Bottom line, most pilots who volunteer for LightHawk — or other organizations — do it because they want to make a difference.

"Most pilots want to do something — they want to contribute," Bedinger says. "They want to make the world a better place."

That's why Bob Keller from Boonville, N.Y., started volunteering as a pilot back in 1995 for Northern Wings, which has since merged with LightHawk.

"I like to fly," he says. "But I feel I need a purpose for what I'm doing. I like to feel I'm accomplishing something."

Flying for LightHawk lets him combine his interest in environmental issues with his skills as a pilot, he notes.

A pilot since 1991, Keller owns a Cessna 182 that he uses for about seven or eight LightHawk missions a year. "I have close to 500 hours in this kind of flying," he says.

While he's flown a variety of missions over the years, lately he's been doing an

# Putting the wild back into wildlife

A few years ago, LightHawk was contacted by Wolf Haven International, a non-profit wildlife rehabilitation organization that provides a sanctuary for wolves and also participates in breeding programs and the Mexican Gray Wolf Recovery Program. They needed help transporting the wolves to their new homes.

“FedEx and UPS had been able to handle these transports up until a few years back when airline security changed,” says Greg Bedinger, LightHawk’s pilot outreach manager. “We were able to connect a volunteer pilot who flies a Pilatus PC-12 and within a week we were moving the wolves.”

Since then, there have been several wildlife transport flights, with volunteer pilots moving endangered animals to new homes or back into their natural habitats.

Only bigger aircraft are flying wolves as they require the largest kennels. “The TBM can’t handle those flights — it isn’t big enough,” he says.

Pilots who own TBMs and other smaller planes have been instrumental in transporting falcons and other small animals back to their natural habitats.

The animal flights are “pretty exciting for the people who are doing them,” Bedinger says.

The very first endangered wolf flight was flown by LightHawk board member Tom Haas and Janice Newman — in Haas’s brand new Pilatus PC-12.

“We were flying back from Denver with the plane on Saturday and the next day, we were pulling out the seats to make room for the wolves,” Haas recalls.

That evening, the two flew from their home base in Portsmouth, N.H., to Manassas, Va., to meet representatives of the Smithsonian National Zoological Park and three wolves who would fly to a new home at the Wildlife West Nature Park in Albuquerque, N.M.

The next morning, as the two were performing their preflight, the handlers arrived with the wolves in three large crates. “The windows were covered with burlap so the wolves couldn’t see out and become scared by their new surroundings,” he recalls. “They weren’t drugged, they were just calmly sitting in the back of their crates. We didn’t hear a peep or a yip out of them the entire flight.”

After the six-hour flight, they landed in Albuquerque. “The folks who met us at the airport were so excited to see us. There were lots of smiles,” he says.

Making the eastbound return trip was a 9-year-old female wolf who had suffered the loss of her mate and then pups just months before their scheduled release back into the wild. She was successfully delivered to the Wolf Conservation Center in New York to find a new mate.

Since then, Haas and Newman have do-



Photos courtesy LightHawk

**A wolf is released into the wild after being transported in a large kennel in a volunteer’s plane. Other animals, including a Bald Eagle, also have been moved to new homes.**

nated several flights to transport wolves. Recently, they flew a female wolf from the Columbus Zoo in Ohio to Wolf Haven in Tenino, Wash., then moved another female to a facility near St. Louis.

They aren’t alone in these efforts. Volunteer pilots Hal Hayden of Prescott, Ariz., and Steve Knaebel of Mexico City recently donated a flight in Hayden’s Beechcraft A36 to move a wolf from Carlsbad, N.M., to Sonora, Mexico. And volunteer pilots Jack Long of Austin, Texas, Joy Covey of Woodside, Calif., John Bell of Woodside, Calif., Zach Huston of Denver, and Randy Luskey of Englewood, Colo., also have flown wolves in their aircraft.

Helping the wolves is a point of pride for LightHawk.

“This is a species teetering on the edge of extinction,” said LightHawk Executive Director (and volunteer pilot) Rudy Engholm. “We’re proud that LightHawk and its volunteer pilots have a hand in helping save them.”

The Mexican wolf was officially listed as endangered in 1976, and had become “functionally” extinct in the Southwest. To prevent the complete extinction of this species, a breeding program was developed to reintroduce the wolves into the wild. The U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service approved the Mexican Gray Wolf Recovery Plan in 1982 and in March 1998 the first captive-reared Mexican wolves were released into the wild, proving that it would be possible to redevelop the population in the Southwest.

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“awful lot” of monitoring missions of land trusts in the East.

“We make sure the land is not being misused,” he says.

He also does a lot of photography missions. “I’ll take a photographer around to document what an area looks like, to see whether it’s not been disturbed vs. heavy development.”

One of his most memorable flights was

years ago when he flew along the Connecticut River to look for Eagle and Osprey nests.

A CFI, Keller says flying for LightHawk has helped him become a better pilot.

“It tends to keep my skills sharp,” he

says. “The flying can be technical and more demanding than other types of flying.”

“It requires professionalism, but you’re still having fun,” he continues.

LightHawk.org