

WINGIN' It

A Carbondale-based paraglider attempts to soar the length of Colorado's Rocky Mountains—capricious alpine weather be damned.

BY MICHAEL BEHAR

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FLIGHT PLAN

From left: Paraglider pilot Pete Thompson evaluates launch sites near Mancos; Thompson soars over Gunnison National Forest, near Lake City.

ON SEPTEMBER 12, 2017, AT EXACTLY 9:32 A.M., A SUNBURNED MAN WITH SHOULDER-LENGTH SANDY BROWN HAIR FELL FROM THE SKY IN LAKE CITY.

He appeared through broken clouds above the mining turned tourist town wedged into a narrow river valley in the San Juan Mountains. Locals who glanced up that morning witnessed his tiny figure soaring silently toward them from the west. His semitranslucent paraglider wing hung above him, the blazing late-summer sun illuminating it as if it were a shining angel descending from the heavens.

Pete Thompson, the paraglider's 32-year-old pilot, approached fast, traveling at nearly 30 mph above a steeply wooded slope, toward a subdivision on the northern outskirts of Lake City. As he neared the ground, he pulled the hand toggles on his glider to engage its brake lines and gently touched down in the front yard of a log home. A neighbor nearby heard her dog barking, presumably at Thompson, and peered out the window. She bolted out of her house, leapt into an SUV, and sped toward him. Thompson wasn't sure if she would be friendly or furious. Folks aren't always keen on strangers abruptly materializing on private property. Thompson was relieved when the woman introduced herself with a chummy handshake and insisted on buying him breakfast at a local cafe, where he ordered huevos rancheros.

I met Thompson a few hours later. We'd established our rendezvous point tentatively because he didn't know where he would end up that day. His flight was largely beholden to the weather, which meant he could have easily overshot Lake City, population 374, and drifted into an adjacent wilderness area where I'd be unable to find him. Fortunately, I located Thompson without too much trouble. He had found his way to a gravel sandbar beside the Lake Fork of the Gunnison River, about five blocks from the center of town. It was a warm afternoon, and Thompson was giddy because he'd just hooked a cutthroat, fishing with a packable Japanese-style tenkara fly rod. Wearing Patagonia garb—a puffy jacket and trekking shorts—Thompson looked pretty good for a guy who'd just spent eight days in the back of the beyond, steering his glider between fourteeners, dodging lightning and hail, and camping above treeline under nothing but a rain fly.

His pricey outerwear went unnoticed by a middle-aged woman who was collecting stones along the riverbank. She approached Thompson and pressed a \$20 bill into his left palm. "Go buy yourself a nice dinner," she whispered into his ear, apparently taking his 70-pound backpack and damp wool socks drying on a nearby tree limb as the unmistakable effects of a homeless drifter.

"Do I really look that bad?" Thompson asked me. I assured him otherwise: "It's a small town, and you just appeared out of the sky. People don't know what to make of that. Besides, you kind of look like Jesus."

THOMPSON, WHO LIVES IN CARBONDALE, had begun his journey just a little more than a week earlier after he'd hitched a ride up an unpaved county road near Mancos, about 20 miles east of Durango in the La Plata Mountains. At 10,193 feet, he thanked the driver and started hiking toward Parrot Peak, climbing more than 1,000 feet in three hours. Because Thompson is slight—five feet five inches tall and 133 pounds—he's known in paragliding circles as "Little Pete." But he's beastly strong. That day, he was carrying more than half his body weight, including 12 days' worth of food, six liters of water, his 20-foot-wide paragliding wing and harness, a camp stove, fuel, and clothing. It was enough gear for a two-week backpacking trek.

Thompson, however, had no desire to actually backpack. He intended to fly most of the way, shadowing the 486-mile Colorado

Trail from Durango to Breckenridge and then diverting north along the Continental Divide to the Wyoming border. If he succeeded, he'd be the first person to paraglide the entire length of Colorado's Rocky Mountains, about 300 miles.

Paragliders call this kind of adventure "vol biv," shorthand for "vol bivouac," a French phrase that loosely translates to "fly and sleep" and for which the paraglider is uniquely suited. Unlike a hang glider—with its limited portability and unwieldy metal frame—a paraglider can fit inside a large daypack. With no rigid mechanical parts, it gets its parabolic shape from air rushing into vents along its leading edge and filling cells stitched into its rip-stop nylon canopy. To gain altitude, pilots must locate "thermals," which are columns of rising, expanding air. If you've seen an eagle soaring effortlessly beside a sunny mountain slope, you've seen the invisible force of a thermal. The physics are identical to how hot air balloons attain altitude—warm air goes up—but for a paraglider pilot, it feels more like riding an express elevator through the troposphere.

Powerful thermals frequently develop on summer afternoons in the Rockies. During July and August, it's normal for warm, moist air from the Pacific Ocean and Gulf of California to stream into Colorado, where it condenses over the high country to produce thunderstorms. Thompson chose to take his trip in September, when the atmosphere usually dries out, making it much safer for paragliding. The thermals persist, but typically without all the lightning, rain, hail, and gusty winds associated with the Centennial State's summer monsoon

PACK MAN

Clockwise from above: Hiking in the La Plata Mountains; soaring high above Cannibal Plateau; fly tying; getting a line wet in the Lake Fork of the Gunnison; fishing at Ross Basin, near Gladstone



Illustrations by Halfpore Def Studios



season. Even if he were to get ideal weather, Thompson would still be facing many unknowns. He knew of only five or six pilots in the United States who vol-biv paraglide—and only a few had stayed out for more than a couple of days at a time. “A trip like this,” he said, “has never been attempted.”

ON DAY TWO, THOMPSON awoke at sunrise, packed up, and then hiked three hours to an alpine saddle at 12,000 feet. He launched his glider into a potent thermal and rocketed up to nearly 18,000 feet, crossing the southwest corner of the San Juans toward Telluride and then over Red Mountain Pass near Silverton. After landing at 11,138 feet, above Gladstone and not far from the Colorado Trail, he typed a note into a handheld electronic tracking device capable of sending text messages, as well as his latitude and longitude, over a satellite uplink. “I have landed and am OK,” he wrote. “The adventure continues!”

I monitored Thompson using an iPhone app that received data from his tracker and overlaid his location, speed, and altitude in real time onto a digital map of Colorado. He was vaulting over the Rockies, skipping across peaks with names like Blackhawk, Whitecap, Graysill, and Anvil. When he did have cell service, Thompson texted photos—lots of sweeping alpine vistas etched into boundless blue horizons. His flights were long and his hikes were short, leaving him physically and mentally energized to the point where he started to let himself think his grand endeavor was neither a fool’s errand nor a death sentence.

His optimism may have been premature. There are no stats on the number of paragliders worldwide—several thousand, by some estimates. But the United States Hang Gliding and Paragliding Association, based in Colorado Springs, does tally fatalities. In 2016, it recorded four deaths; this year, six pilots had perished as of press time in early November. Poor weather, mechanical failures, aerial stunts gone awry, drowning (after pilots inadvertently crash into water), and midair entanglements cause most accidents.

Paragliding across a mountain range is, of course, exceedingly dangerous. But it’s possible to mitigate the risks. For Thompson, picking good launch sites was a smart place to start; he favored grassy areas situated at least 2,000 feet above valleys. Moderate headwinds and sunny slopes were also helpful. “When launching, I basically needed to find rising air immediately,” he said. Landing wasn’t always as straightforward. Paraglider pilots have a cardinal rule: Never take off without knowing where you’re going to land. And yet Thompson broke that rule routinely, scouting his landings from the air, over unfamiliar terrain, often in rough weather with just minutes to decide where to plunk down.

“I had to find spots with space to land and where the air wasn’t too turbulent,” he said. “It had to be near a takeoff point for the next day, close to a spot to camp, with water, and in a location that was not too exposed to storms.” His approach was prudent, if not always successful. On his second day, near Silverton, Thompson flew into some “downdrafts”—rapidly sinking cold air, often ejected from thunderstorms. “They took me by surprise,” he said. “I had only one option to land, and that was on a rocky slope.” Wind gusts tossed him around like a toddler sharing a trampoline with an elephant. “I had to focus on simply performing to keep the fear from affecting how I flew,” he said. His life depended on it.

AVIATION HISTORIANS USUALLY attribute the invention of the first, albeit crude, paraglider to a NASA aeronautical engineer named David Barish. In the 1960s, Barish developed a parachuteline contraption for gently gliding the Apollo space capsule back to Earth after re-entry.

Although NASA ultimately opted for a more conventional parachute design, Barish continued tinkering. Eventually, he created a parabolic “wing” for recreational gliding, testing prototypes in the Catskill Mountains near his home.

Vol biv arrived about a decade later, in the 1970s, when French alpinists got tired of rappelling off summits they had climbed, a time-consuming and often hazardous procedure (a fifth of all climbing accidents occur during rappels). Newer parachutes had come along that gave jumpers more steering control. Glide ratios had also improved: Instead of plunging like a stone, parachutists could now soar about three feet forward for every one foot they descended. But French mountaineers wanted to harness the power of thermals to experience true flight—to go up before going down.

A period of frenetic development ensued, and what emerged was the modern paraglider, its name a portmanteau of “parachute” and “glider.” Made with longer wingspans, lighter materials, and in shapes resembling an airfoil, pilots could attain 11 to one glide ratios and ride thermals for hours. (The current distance record is 350 miles, flown continuously over 11 hours.) Vol-biv paragliding was popularized in the Alps, which are ideally suited for the sport because towns and villages dot the entire region. Pilots there can sail all afternoon and then drop themselves into a hamlet for fondue and a glass of Beaujolais, bedding down in comfort at a slopeside inn.

The Rockies, however, aren’t the Alps. Thompson had to cross numerous far-flung wilderness areas in Colorado—Weminuche, Uncompahgre, Holy Cross, Eagles Nest, and Never Summer, among others—only accessible by foot or axle-snapping jeep roads. “The most wild thing about my trip is all the unknowns,” Thompson said. “When backpacking, you know how far you’re going to hike, how long it will take, when you can resupply, and where you’ll camp. I never know where I’m going to land. Everything is done on the fly.”

Thompson is also an experienced rock climber and an avid “high-liner,” a fringe pursuit that involves stretching inch-wide nylon webbing over a deep canyon and then tiptoeing across the expanse wearing a safety harness. “I love feeling on the edge a bit,” he said. “But I don’t like to feel like I’m risking life or limb. This is a bit of a conflict with paragliding.” He discovered the sport in 2003, shortly after graduating high school in Uniontown, Pennsylvania, where he grew up. “A buddy owned a glider and took me out to a ski hill,” Thompson recalled. “He crashed trying to launch.” After a few more failed attempts they gave up, but from that moment, Thompson was all in. The two friends contacted a paragliding instructor in West Virginia, who agreed to give them formal instruction.



FLY LIKE AN EAGLE
Clockwise from top: Ready for takeoff on the Cannibal Plateau; catching thermals over San Juan National Forest; Thompson checking the wind; resting underneath his rain fly after a quick landing to avoid incoming storms



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THE VIEW FROM ABOVE
Thompson glides over the area
around Hurricane Pass, not too
far from Gladstone and Silverton.

Following his freshman year at Montana State University in Bozeman, Thompson spent the summer in Utah honing his gliding skills in the Wasatch Range. Over the subsequent three summers he lived in Jackson, Wyoming, a popular paragliding locale. After college, Thompson moved to Colorado, where a company in Glenwood Springs called Adventure Paragliding hired him to take tourists on tandem flights. He's been with the outfit ever since.

As one might expect, being a professionally employed paragliding pilot means limited paid vacation. By the time Thompson landed in Lake City, he had just five days remaining before his boss expected him back at work. If he soared the crow-fly line to Wyoming, he'd only have to cover about 200 miles in that time. But with more than a decade of experience paragliding in Colorado, he knew that wasn't likely to happen. As a calorie-deprived Thompson devoured a chicken-fried steak the size of a Frisbee at a diner in Lake City, he explained why: "You have ranges going east to west and north to south, and valleys going in all different directions, and high plateaus." In other words, the terrain can wreak havoc on the atmosphere, making it impossible (or simply reckless) for a paraglider to fly in a straight line.

There is almost no weather consistency in the Rockies, even across relatively tiny geographic regions. During the winter, for example, snowstorms can drop a foot of snow on Vail while only an inch or two falls at Copper Mountain, just 15 miles away. Virtually anyone who has spent time outdoors in Colorado has experienced this enigma. Forecasts aren't much help, either, as the state's complex topography and dynamic winds often render predictions inaccurate almost the moment they are made.

WHEN THOMPSON LEFT MANCOS, the 10-day prognosis was encouraging: ample sunshine and no rain. It was optimal for long-distance paragliding because he'd be able to launch by mid-morning—when the sun began generating thermals—and continue flying until early evening.

Except that's not what happened. Despite the promising forecast, a mid-July-like monsoon pattern developed, with monster thunderstorms exploding every afternoon. Initially, Thompson wasn't keen on sleeping on exposed summits and ridges. Instead, he "top landed," as it's known in paragliding lingo, and then descended about 2,000 feet on foot to camp below treeline, where he was more protected. In the mornings, he'd climb back up to launch his paraglider. But the persistent thunderstorms shrank his daily flying window to one or two hours. That meant eliminating the long hikes to camp in the woods and overnighing where he landed in order to fly sooner the following day.

On his third morning, he trudged to the summit of a nameless peak above Red Mountain Pass, hoping for an epic flight. He didn't get far: Storms forced him out of the sky at 1 p.m. "The weather shut me down," he said. "It put added pressure on me to really nail day four." That evening, he slept on a barren pass at 12,500 feet. After a restful night, he broke camp and climbed a slender hogback to gain another 1,000 feet. Shortly after 10 a.m., he launched his glider over an east-facing slope, where the mid-morning sun was spawning strong thermals. His timing was excellent. The rising warm air enabled him to gain altitude rapidly. At 15,400 feet, he banked northeast toward Uncompahgre Peak, the state's sixth-highest fourteener.

As thunderstorms, rain, and gusty winds closed in later on in the day, he began scouting for somewhere to set down. But the vast Uncompahgre Wilderness—where, as in all wilderness areas, it is illegal to launch or land a paraglider—unfurled below him. Thompson spotted a treeless expanse just beyond the wilderness boundary and landed unscathed. With the squall bearing down, he didn't look for a campsite lower on the mountain, a decision he soon regretted. The

storms beat on his rain fly for hours, with spells so savage Thompson worried about getting blown into the void. "It felt dangerous and out of my control," he said. "I was at the mercy of the mountain."

In the morning, he rushed to get airborne. Billowy cumulus clouds were already swelling upward, prophetically dark and fearsome. The thermals weren't strong enough, though, and his flight lasted just 20 minutes. After landing, he hiked down to treeline, where he was able to collect enough dead timber to build a fire. When his iPhone briefly got service, he texted: "The storms yesterday were scary. I don't like lightning in the high mountains. Having to wait it out on a high pass was terrifying."

Over the next four days, the rain was unrelenting. So Thompson hiked, meandering for miles with his 70-pound pack across loose scree and open tundra, not only searching for water (at one point he was down to just 16 ounces), but also trying to find sheltered campsites. Before he left his home in Carbondale, Thompson downloaded digital topographic maps to his iPhone, which he now used to locate Crystal Lake, in the southeast corner of the Uncompahgre Wilderness. Fishing at the lake, he thought, would ease the boredom that came with being grounded for multiple days, and with luck he might bag dinner, too. There were no established trails from his position, so he relied on the maps. It was a five-mile walk. When he arrived, a bull and a cow elk grazing beside the shore hardly noticed his presence. Thompson sent me a note: "No fish in lake." He was borderline despondent.

Two days later, Thompson's mood had improved a little—but the weather hadn't. Camped 700 feet above Crystal Lake, the pilot had donned every piece of clothing he had and assumed the so-called "lightning crouch" as another storm ripped through. Hail ricocheted through an open gap at the bottom of his rain fly (he'd left his tent at home to save weight). He frantically scooped up the ice balls plinking



WING AND A PRAYER
From top: Thompson prepares his glider before launch; gear at the ready, the paraglider pilot surveys unpredictable skies.

onto his sleeping bag; he knew that if the goose down got wet, its thermal properties would be destroyed and he'd freeze to death. For a brief moment, he contemplated running down into the valley, but instead he decided to hunker down and tried not to panic.

WHILE DRIVING FROM GUNNISON toward Lake City, I kept checking the tracker app, hoping to intercept Thompson on his

eighth day, while he camped in a basin located along a popular trail that originated from town. But at 7 a.m., he was already on the move, hiking swiftly near Crystal Peak, elevation 12,933 feet. By 9 a.m. he was airborne and racing toward Lake City, where he landed 20 minutes later. I found him along the river later that afternoon.

We left Lake City the next morning at 6 a.m., in the dark. The previous evening, the owner of the motel where we stayed had proposed that Thompson launch his glider from a nearby mesa called the Cannibal Plateau, named for Alfred Packer, a prospector convicted in 1883 of murdering and then eating members of his mining party after snows trapped them in the San Juans. I had agreed to shuttle Thompson to the trailhead. From there we set off on foot, climbing switchbacks through slate gray stands of beetle-ravaged pines.

He moved briskly, stoked to get back in the air. While we walked, I updated him on the climate mayhem he'd missed while he was away—wildfires ravaging the Pacific Northwest; apocalyptic Hurricane Irma; Houston still flooded. He wasn't listening. He was fixated on the fluttery breeze, the bluebird sky, and any other meteorological hints that suggested favorable flying weather. Thompson veered west off the trail toward an overlook above Slumgullion Slide, where the plateau drops precipitously into a river basin below. Not quite satisfied with launching there, he marched higher. About four miles from the trailhead, Thompson settled on a treeless expanse at 12,500 feet. He unpacked his glider and meticulously checked its control lines for tangles.

Tiny cotton-ball clouds materialized, an indication that warmer air was starting to bubble up from the valley and condense in the cooler temperatures at our elevation. Suddenly, a northern harrier hawk appeared, its wings extended and circling upward—unmistakable proof that a powerful thermal was brewing. The hawk was Thompson's cue: He yanked the glider lines to hoist his blue-and-black wing aloft and then sprinted down a steep incline. Within 30 yards, he was airborne. At first he plunged rapidly, vanishing from view. But soon he reappeared in the exact spot where the hawk had been soaring. Seconds later, he was directly overhead and ascending fast. Lying on my back in the alpine grass, I watched him climb until he was a pinhole speck sailing between the clouds.

Once I got back to my car and into cell range, I followed him on my app. Altitude: 13,734 feet, airspeed 40 mph—fast for a paraglider. Ten minutes later he was at 16,766 feet. There was only one problem: He was going the wrong way. Thompson was heading due south, toward New Mexico. When I checked his position again, he was slowing down and descending rapidly. It appeared he was going to crash into the Rio Grande. Then he banked sharply west and skidded into a cow pasture beside CO 149. *Ding!* A text from Thompson: "I'm at the Broken Arrow Ranch, a few miles before Creede." The sky blackened, and rain pelted my windshield. Minutes later, it was hailing. When I pulled up beside Thompson, he was huddled under a roadside shelter. "I wanted a long flight, so I followed the wind," he said with a shrug.

The wet weather wasn't letting up, so we decided to travel north about 100 miles toward Salida, where the climate is often warmer and drier. "I know of a launch off of Princeton," said Thompson, referring to the 14,197-foot mountain in the Collegiate Peaks. He wanted to make one last push to keep flying. It was clear and calm at dawn the following day. But by late morning, a stiff breeze had picked up and cumulus clouds portended rain, killing his chance to launch that day.

By then, Thompson was resigned to calling it off, already contemplating how he'd do it differently next year, perhaps starting a bit earlier in the summer. I gave him a ride to Twin Lakes; from there he would hitchhike home to Carbondale. As I pulled away, I saw him protrude his thumb at passing cars, his colossal pack eclipsing all but his arms and the top of his head. The aspens had turned and were blushing oranges and yellows beneath sinister clouds creeping westward. His decision to abort was wise. Adventurers often have a single-minded determination that can blind them to obvious danger. At least Thompson was savvy enough to recognize the odds were skewing against him. Indeed, that night a cold front barreled into the Rockies, bringing with it sub-freezing temperatures and dusting the high peaks with the season's first snow. I recalled what Thompson told me earlier: that vol-biv paragliding is just as much about knowing when not to fly, because sometimes you just have to let the mountains win. ▲▲

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