



The sun is not up yet in Afton, Wyoming, and the last I checked, the temperature was reading 10 degrees. *Fahrenheit*. I pull on two layers of long underwear, ski pants, turtleneck, a wool sweater, two pairs of socks and the Sorel boots and huge down parka—remnants from my old

Minnesota days—that I dragged out of deep storage for this trip.

“This had better be an awful lot of fun, to make all this worthwhile,” I think as I drive down the snowbank-lined road to the airport.

In most parts of the country, the onset of bitter temperatures and winter storms prompts recreational pilots to tuck their airplanes inside a warm hangar and retreat to the comfort of a cozy hearth and fire until the only icing conditions are in the beer cooler. But there are a few places, and a few hangar rows, where pilots actually look forward to winter. Instead of fighting the snow and ice, these pilots *embrace* the season, exchanging their wheels

for skis and heading out into a landscape suddenly awash with landing sites.

As far as I can discern, ski flying dates back almost as far as aviation itself. It may not have been patently obvious how best to design a functioning airplane, but the idea of putting skis underneath a plane’s wheels probably originated minutes after the first snowbound pilot realized he was stuck.

Then there was Sir Harry Wigley, a New Zealander who absconded with a section of his mother’s Formica countertop (or so the story goes) to help develop the first set of *retractable* skis in 1955. Using a crude, hand-operated retraction system, Wigley used his invention to fly his Auster Aiglet from the paved runway at Mt. Cook onto

the Tasman Glacier, high up in New Zealand’s Southern Alps—with Sir Edmund Hillary as one of his very first passengers.

Which illustrates perfectly what a pair of airplane skis can do for you. Not everyone needs to get up on the Tasman glacier, of course. (In point of fact, I doubt anyone ever really *needed* to get up on the Tasman glacier, even in Wigley’s day.) But strap a pair of skis on a plane, and 45 minutes later, you can be standing in the middle of a winter wonderland so dramatically remote, unspoiled and crystal-perfect that it dazzles your senses and takes your breath away.

The one thing the experience isn’t likely to be, however, is warm. The last time I



Where Wheels

Dare Not Go

Ski Flying

BY LANE WALLACE

went ski flying, it was a 30-below-zero weekend in Minnesota, with a brisk 25-knot breeze. To say we were all a bit cold *truly* doesn't do the experience justice. So even though the Wyoming forecast called for temperatures in the far-more-hospitable, positive-numbers range, I fully expected my second attempt at ski flying to entail more than a little discomfort, as well. But then, I hadn't counted on Bill Wiemann.

Wiemann is an Aviat dealer in Alpine, Wyoming, who loves backwoods flying in any season, but who's also a firm believer in comfort and warmth as well as adventure—a fact that becomes obvious the moment one steps into his rustic lodge-style FBO at the privately-owned, public-use Alpine Airport. Huge, overstuffed leather couches and chairs surround a crackling, wood-burning fireplace in the corner of an

open, beamed-ceiling log structure where, he says, pilots are always welcome to “drop in for a cold Corona.”

Wiemann is the reason I'm in Wyoming—Wiemann and his stable of brand-new, ski-equipped Huskies, which he and Aviat owner Stu Horne have invited me to come and fly. Alpine lies in the Wyoming highlands, smack on the Idaho border, one ridge over from Jackson Hole and at the confluence of three rivers—the Salt, the Snake and the Greys. Those rivers form the Palisades Reservoir, which creeps, at times, within a couple dozen yards of Wiemann's hangar.

“Yeah, it's a carrier approach, coming in here sometimes,” Wiemann says with a laugh.

Alpine Airport, which Wiemann bought two years ago, lies at an elevation

of 5,720 feet, nestled between the Salt River Range and what locals call the “western hills” of the Star Valley. The valley name sounds wonderfully poetic until Wiemann tells me that it's actually short for “*Starvation Valley*”—the moniker given to it by early settlers. Why Starvation Valley? Because the valley got so much snow in the winter that no animals foraged there—leaving the settlers with no sources of food.

In terms of ski flying, however, that means Star Valley offers some prime real estate and options.

The morning sun is shining brilliantly on the steep, glistening slopes of the Grand Tetons by the time Stu Horne and I fly down to Wiemann's place and trade our wheeled Husky for one of his ski-equipped aircraft. The Husky type certifi-



Perfection for any ski bum: a few inches of fresh powder on a good, solid base.

And for a ski pilot? A plane like an Aviat Husky A-1B, with a 180 hp engine and a controllable-pitch prop to make best use of that power for sticky snow takeoffs.

cate covers all three basic kinds of aircraft skis: straight skis, simple retractable skis and hydraulic wheel-skis. Wiemann uses the second kind, which can be retracted in flight but then have to be re-extended on the ground. The ones on Wiemann's Huskies are made by the Aero Ski Manufacturing Company in Brooten, Minnesota, and cost about \$7,500.

Some pilots prefer the cheaper and simpler option of straight skis, which cost about half the price. But Wiemann likes the lower hassle factor associated with skis that don't require removing the plane's wheels, as well as the option of landing on hard-surface runways for fuel, or if snow conditions deteriorate. Ideal, of course, would be hydraulic wheel-skis, which can be extended and retracted in flight as many times as required. But the additional investment for wheel-skis, just like amphibious floats, is significant. The hydraulic wheel-skis manufactured by Wipline, for example, run between \$18,000-\$23,000.

To make sure the comfort factor of our experience is covered, Wiemann has already dispatched a bevy of friends on a backcountry expedition to catch some trout and set up a camp for us, complete with campfire and log seats, along an open section of the Salt River. They, of course, will take a whole lot longer to get

there than we will, which leaves us time to practice takeoffs and landings in a number of places before heading toward our breakfast stop.

As with floats, much of the challenge—and fun—of flying an airplane on skis lies in the landing and takeoff portions of flight. There are no brakes, so a landing on ice can be an interesting experience. And, at least in theory, the plane will start moving as soon as the engine is turned on. I say “in theory,” because in reality, one of the biggest challenges in ski flying can be getting the plane to break free of the snow, if it's been sitting in one spot for any length of time. Wiemann, in fact, makes a point of taking not only survival gear, but also snow shoes, a shovel, and a lightweight block-and-tackle with a 200-foot rope with him in the airplane, just in case.

But once the plane is moving, a takeoff from snow is very much like a takeoff from water. Once or twice, I had to rock the stick back and forward a bit to get the tail ski to break free of the snow and find the “sweet spot” where acceleration was the best. But the feel of the airplane tells you as much about when the plane wants to fly as the airspeed indicator does. It gets light on its step, and then just a little back pressure—at least in a Husky—elevates you into the sky.

The Aviat Husky is particularly well-suited for ski flying—at least in its category—both because of its sheer horsepower and because of its controllable-pitch prop, which allows best use of that horsepower for sticky takeoffs. (While Aviat does offer a smaller, 150 hp version of the Husky, most aircraft are produced with either 180- or 200-horsepower engines.) The 180 hp Husky I flew in Wyoming was also the first A-1B model I'd flown, and I found its flight controls far more pleasant and harmonized than its predecessor, an improvement Aviat says is due to new flap and aileron designs. The Husky also has a really good heater/defroster—another plus for a ski flying platform.

In some ways, landing on snow is reminiscent of a water landing, as well. “Ski flying is one of the last frontiers,” Wiemann says, “because you're always landing on uncontrolled surfaces.” Logs and potential hazards can hide under snow just as easily as they can hide below a lake surface, and an open snowfield can present the same depth-perception difficulties as a body of glassy-smooth water. The good news is, there are so many landing sites in a typical snow-covered landscape that you rarely have to deal with a crosswind.

The first step, according to Wiemann, is to make sure you can get out of any place you decide to go into, keeping in mind that takeoff distances will differ dramatically not only on different days, but even at different times of the *same* day, as snow conditions change. There's

no guaranteed method for accomplishing that, but Wiemann typically starts by making a landing and takeoff from a broad, open area, and then flies back over and times how long it takes him to pass his tracks in the snow below. Then, when he's scouting a tighter potential landing site, he times how long it takes him to fly over it to ensure that it's at least as long as the first site.

"Whatever you think you need to take off, double it and you'll probably be okay," he says, with the caveat that "the snow in the trees tends to pile deeper than in broad, open areas, so conditions won't be the same everywhere." Consequently, Wiemann makes his first pass to any new landing site a "brush and go," adding power as soon as the skis contact the snow so he can get a feel for the grip and stickiness of the snow without sinking far enough to get stuck.

Clearly, ski flying is not for technology-dependent or strict, by-the-numbers pilots. But then, ski flying is almost exclusively the province of tailwheel pilots, who tend to fly as much by the seat of their pants as by the gauges, anyway.

Following Wiemann's advice, we first practice some landings on the open, snow-covered surface of the Palisades Reservoir before attempting shorter fields and strips. It seems to help to use a shallow approach—over a snowfield, the engine quitting on short final isn't a real worry point—so the rate of descent into the snow is gentle.

"You want to settle into it, more than land on it," Stu Horne tells me.

I reduce power on the Husky and flare slightly, waiting for the feel of snow on the skis. When we touch, I *hear* the scrape of snow on metal as much as I feel the accompanying deceleration, and I immediately add power to take off again. With each pass, I let the plane settle a little deeper into the snow before adding power, testing the Husky's ability to overcome the drag and get back in the air. By the second pass, I decide that I've never en-

The Grand Teton Mountain Range (top) towers over some ideal ski flying territory, where an intrepid pilot/fisherman can catch breakfast in a nearby river (center) and then cook it over an open campfire to take the edge off any morning chill or hunger. Bring along a few friends, and you have something close to ski flying heaven (bottom).



LANE WALLACE

SUE HAUN

AVIAT



LANE WALLACE

Lane and Aviat President Stu Horne basking in the winter wonderland of Wyoming's Star Valley, alongside one of Aviat's new A-1B Huskies equipped with retractable Aero Skis. (Breakfast is hanging off the strut to the left.)

joyed landing so much. No bounce, no jarring slam onto choppy surface water. Just a gentle “swoosh” as the snow gives way and surrounds my skis with a whisper of friction as the granulated snow gently slows us to a stop. I could grow to like this, cold temperatures and all.

Satisfied that the snow conditions are okay, Wiemann radios that he's heading south, and we follow. We do landings at a couple of additional snow-covered grass strips and landing sites before circling around a short but wide-open area along a curve of the Salt River. I see Wiemann's buddies off to one side as I land and add a touch of power to keep the deceleration from being too abrupt—and to keep us moving for as long as we need to taxi.

I climb out of the plane to a scene straight out of an Orvis catalog. Mike is in hip waders, fly fishing for trout in the frigid but gently-flowing curve of the river. Rex, Randy and Casey are busy steaming the rainbow and cutthroat trout Rex

has already caught, while Bill's sons Mitch and Bryce are busy getting eggs, hash browns and sausage prepared on a propane stove. Hot coffee and gravy are simmering over a robust, crackling campfire.

Rex hands me a cup of steaming coffee and tells me to pull a log up to the fire. As I do, my o-dark-thirty wake-up call and the chilly morning temperatures somehow seem less noteworthy. Was I really cold this morning? At the moment, I'm 100 percent warm and cozy, sitting by a fire and basking in the rays of a midday winter sun reflected off a brilliant white landscape.

I sip my coffee and look around at valley snowfields framed by two sets of mountain ranges, delicate willows bending over snow-draped river banks and a flock of geese taking off from a nearby grove of trees. Flying, by its very nature, entails any number and types of uncomfortable moments. But this one is simply ... perfect. So is the trout, when Rex pulls it off the fire.

“I sent these guys in by truck and Snowcat, today,” Wiemann tells me. “But we could have put all the stuff we needed for this in the Huskies and just flown it in, if we wanted to go someplace even more remote.”

As many times as I have sworn I will never live in snow country again, I suddenly find myself fantasizing about living in Wyoming and owning a Husky on skis. And the flying valley tour we take later that day, alongside the unbelievably majestic peaks of the Grand Teton range, only reinforces that inclination.

By the time evening falls and the planes are back in the barn, the sky is clouding over again. More snow is on the way. But to Wiemann, that's a good thing. “Oh, man,” he says with a gleam in his eye. “A good solid base with a few inches of fresh powder on top of it? That's perfection.” Spoken like a true Wyoming ski bum. Which, of course, he is. A ski bum with the ultimate lift ticket and a magic set of skis. ✈



SUE HAUN