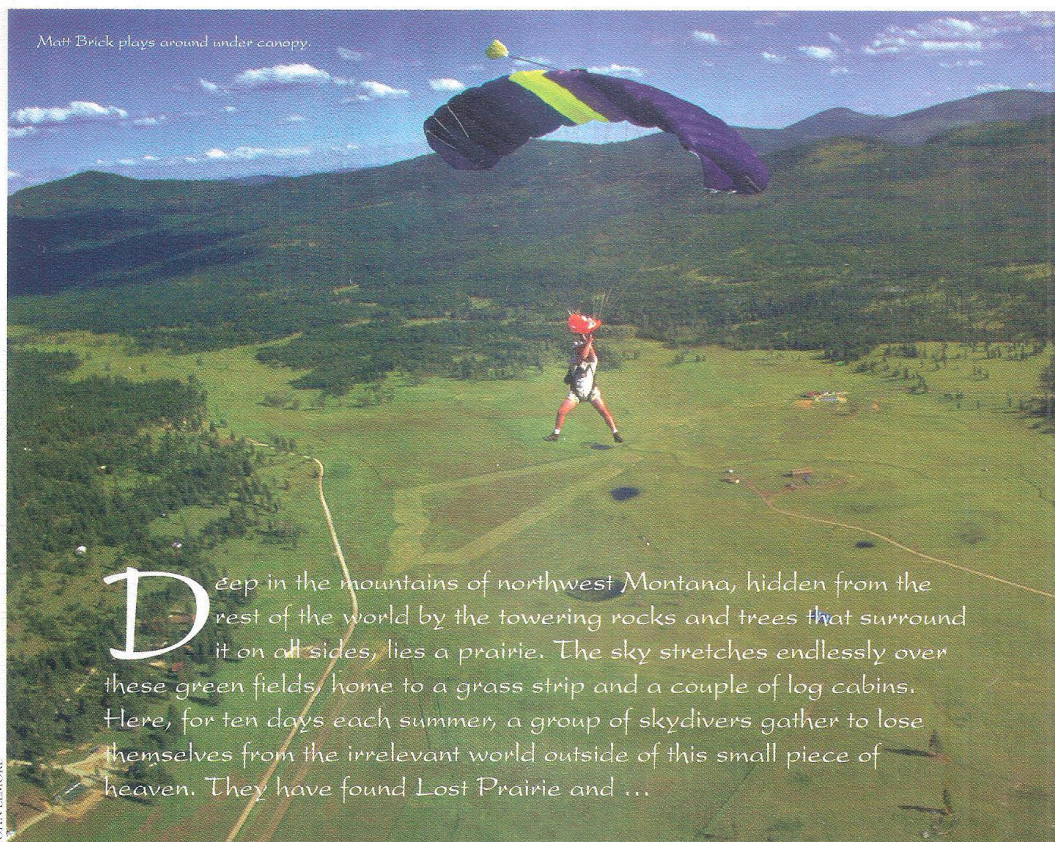


Lost Prairie POPS vs PUPS competition

19-29 Jul 1997

Marion, MT

Matt Brick plays around under canopy.



Deep in the mountains of northwest Montana, hidden from the rest of the world by the towering rocks and trees that surround it on all sides, lies a prairie. The sky stretches endlessly over these green fields, home to a grass strip and a couple of log cabins. Here, for ten days each summer, a group of skydivers gather to lose themselves from the irrelevant world outside of this small piece of heaven. They have found Lost Prairie and ...

the secret in the mountains

the 30th annual lost prairie boogie • by nancy j. koreen

The nearest grocery store to the drop zone in Marion, Montana, is 38 miles away in Kalispell. In that small town also resides the closest airport. Jumpers traveling commercial are lucky to snatch a seat on one of the handful of expensive flights arriving there each day. The jets load and unload directly onto the tarmac. The terminal consists of little more than three gates and a baggage belt.

The drop zone isn't so remote, though, that some signs of civilization can't reach it. A small FedEx van travels ten miles from the main highway down the bumpy dirt road to the DZ. It stirs up clouds of dust in its wake, carefully avoiding the cows mulling alongside the road.

But Lost Prairie's remoteness must be part of its charm, because year after year, jumpers return, while others discover it for the first time. Whatever it is that keeps them coming has made this event the longest running boogie in skydiving's brief history. On July 19-29, 1997, in Marion, Montana, 413 skydivers celebrated the 30th Annual Lost Prairie Boogie.

A Little History

From their home across the road, DZ owners Fred and Lenni Sand operate the drop zone year 'round, even during Montana's frigid, snowy winter months. Formerly the Osprey Sport Parachute Club, Skydive Lost Prairie moved to Marion from Kalispell in 1980.

five years. Ian Aitken of Alberta, Canada, Mark Vojtko from Northern Virginia, and Airspeed cameraman John Leming also organized skydives.

While formation skydiving dominated jumping activity, jumpers added a little diversity, coming up with creative variations to some of the more traditional skydives.

The organizers collaborated on several 60- and 68-way attempts, trying to set a record for the Northwest region. Although several attempts came close, none completed.

The Lost Prairie boogie, ever popular with the old-timers, also hosted some friendly competition. POPS members challenged their younger skydiving counterparts to some POPS vs. Pups 20-ways. The POPS claimed victory, and despite the ribbing between the two groups, the pups finally conceded, acknowledging that the old folks must still have a little life left in them.

An Otter load of novices and experts alike honed up on their fundamentals in a tracking contest. Jumpers on the ground judged the contest by watching how much distance across the sky each tracker covered. Freeflyer Charles Bryan of Tahoe, California, won that race.

One group of jumpers proudly bore their battle scars, participating in a "heavy metal" dive for those with some kind of metal holding their bodies together. Each told the story of why he or she had some metal plates or rods somewhere inside. And not all were skydiving-related.

A handful of freeflyers also made an appearance, even jumping with the belly-flyers. They compromised, standing through the middle or crawling on top of the RW formations.

Other skydiving highlights included raft jumps, hoop dives and the ever-popular sunset hop-and-pops from 13,000 feet.

Around Town

The drop zone wasn't the only place to witness jumping activity. An Otter load jumped into Lang Brewery, about a 20-minute drive from Lost Prairie. Aviation and skydiving fans, the brewery owners treated jumpers to a beer tasting of some of their finer ales, currently available only in the Northwest.

A Skyvan full of early birds went on a breakfast dive one morning. They flew to Kalispell and jumped into Glacier Park International Airport. After dining out, they returned on the

Skyvan and jumped back into Lost Prairie.

Other skydivers made a demo jump into a nearby dude ranch, where vacationers pay to learn how to herd cattle. Dinner at the ranch followed the sunset jump.

Taking an evening off from jumping, about 70 boogiers caravanned up to the Meadow's Peak watch tower. The tower sits atop a mountain 3,400 feet above the drop zone. From only a handful of miles away, it overlooks Lost Prairie, already 3,000 feet above sea level. After a two-hour off-road journey up the mountain, participants braved the brisk, whipping winds, from which the peak offered little protection. A visual treat paid them for their efforts: They squinted to see skydivers freefalling past them in the distance. Then they turned to face west, where the sun cast a yellow-orange glow over the mountain tops as it slipped away for the night.

The Conspiracy

Warm, sunny days blessed this year's event—much different than last year's wash-out. By boogie's end, jumpers had made 5,770 skydives, a Lost Prairie record—not bad for what's often called the most laid-back boogie around. The summer sun doesn't disappear behind the mountains until almost 10 p.m., but no one ever jumped that late.

The long, warm days led to cold, starry nights. The DZ prohibits individual fires at campsites—too great a risk of forest fires—forcing boogie-goers to leave their temporary homes to gather at the Lost Prairie Lounge or around the bonfire just outside.

Jumpers from across the U.S., especially the Northwest, as well as a large Canadian contingency, came to Montana this year. For many, this "Triple X" 30th anniversary boogie served as a reunion of old friends. Certainly, the veterans embraced the newcomers. Yet, there seemed almost to be some sort of conspiracy among these Lost Prairie old-timers. They only want to share so much of their treasure; they want to keep it hidden from the rest of the skydiving world.

"The place is ugly, the people are nasty, there's nothing to drink, and it snowed for four days," claims boogie veteran Dave Mahoney. Then, on a more sincere note, "You should have seen this place before the world found out about it. This place is magic."

Maybe some secrets are better kept.



Jumpers return from the landing area as another day winds down on the prairie.

JOHN ELMORE