

LAKE MARTIN ALABAMA EDITION

# LAKE

MAGAZINE

## FLOWING DESIGNS

Meet the man behind some of Lake  
Martin's most peaceful landscape designs

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# Riding On The Sky

Lake Martin visitors are nothing unusual. Thousands drive to the lake each summer weekend to enjoy the view of one of the Southeast's most beautiful lakes. But one lake visitor is very unusual – he arrives a completely different way and enjoys a completely different view of the lake.

Mickey Voss, who lives with his wife Diane in a converted barn on their Hatchett Creek farm in Clay County, spends his days installing irrigation and landscape lighting systems around the lake as the owner of Voss Irrigation, often working with another person featured in this edition, landscaper Ricky Pope.

However, on selected weekends when the weather's right, Voss can be found dangling above the lake in a powered paraglider – a tiny, lightweight flying machine that has more in common with a bunch of balloons tied to a lawn chair than it does to a traditional airplane.

And when he arrives, other lake visitors tend to stop looking at

the lake ... and start looking up. One of those visits was this summer's Fourth of July holiday, when Voss caused a commotion by buzzing all around the Kowaliga area.

Voss, who says he loves to fly his paraglider, admits that flying over water in a paraglider is not recommended.

"You're always thinking, quit, quit, quit," he said, discussing the potential for the motor to cut out mid-flight. "It's not an

airplane, it doesn't have all those double spark plugs and double ignition systems ...

While Voss has had mechanical problems with another paraglider, his current machine is, so far, flawless.

"This one's never quit and I've got 50 hours on it," he said.

The good news is that even if the motor does stop, a paraglider doesn't need the motor to land. In fact, the motor's main purpose is

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STORY & PHOTOS BY KENNETH BOONE

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to propel the machine up. Coming back down, and turning, is all handled by the paraglider wing with manual controls.

"It's got a six to one glide ratio," Voss said. "If you're up a mile, you can glide six times that. That's in perfect conditions ... if you've got a headwind, it might be half that."

The danger in flying over the lake is that if the engine cuts out, especially if the paraglider is low over the water, then the pilot may not have enough room to glide to a solid landing spot.

"I was over the island near Martin Dam at 2,000 feet one day, headed to the amphitheater," Voss said, describing a hair-raising incident that happened in his first paraglider. "It coughed, sputtered on, and I landed in a man's front yard in Red Hill."

That engine problem was the result of a broken ignition wire. As a result, Voss says now he closely inspects every part on his paraglider before he goes over the water.

"I'll check it to death," he said.

And he takes the additional precautions of wearing a lifejacket over the lake and running the motor on aviation fuel and the best oil money can buy. But he doesn't buckle himself in as securely as he does on an over-land flight.

"Absolutely not, no. Don't lock yourself in over the lake," he said, explaining that if the machine ever did fall into the lake, getting out of the sinking tangle of webbing and parachute cords is Job 1.

Voss says he has about \$9,000 invested in his flying machine, including accessories like a Garmin GPS he bought from Wal-Mart and a larger-than-normal gas tank which allows him to stay aloft for three and a half hours.

The paraglider, made by Black Hawk, is basically four different pieces of gear cobbled together into one lightweight, efficient package. The part that does the flying is the wing, a long narrow wing. Power comes from a very lightweight 24 horse power gasoline motor that turns a large, wooden prop behind a safety cage. The pilot sits in front of the engine's safety cage in a flexible chair made of webbing and pads, and is held to the engine and the wing with harnesses and straps. Finally, an optional and removable set of landing

gear – three fat, bouncy tires.

The whole rig weighs about 110 pounds, and Voss said if he took the "trike" frame and wheels off and wore the paraglider on his back, the rig would weigh closer to 75 pounds.

Some paraglider pilots have machines small enough to pack in a suitcase, and they bring along their flying machines when they travel to get a birds-eye-view of new places. That means there's no landing gear and each flight begins and ends with the pilot running, which is not necessarily a good fit for everyone since it entails wearing an unwieldy 75-pound backpack with a hot motor with a big propeller whirring right behind your head.

"Most people are going to wheels now," Voss said. "I've seen a big old guy running out and step in a hole. Pow!"

Voss demonstrated his paraglider at his Hatchett Creek farm, and while all this may have a devil-may-care ring to it, in practice, to an objective observer, flying a paraglider appeared to be a calming, peaceful activity that, frankly, looked easy.

Voss said it is.

"Taking off is the hard part. If you ever get off the ground, that's it ... Once you get off the ground, you just sit there," he said.

The reason taking off is difficult is that the pilot must face into the wind, if there is any, rev up the motor and move forward at the same time that he's managing the wing behind him. Each flight begins with the wing stretched out flat on the ground. Once the wind catches the wing, it will rise above the pilot, but until there's a steady flow of air beneath the wing, it has a tendency to swing from side to side or oscillate. If the wing is off to one side when the pilot leaves the ground, he might be reintroduced to mother earth abruptly.

Once the stable flight begins, Voss said paragliding is a breeze.

"As long as it's over my head, I give it the gas and away you go ... It would just land itself if I passed out, but it might land in a tree or something."

To steer, a pilot just pulls a handle that cinches up one end of the wing, increasing drag on that side and turning the paraglider.

Voss said he bought his first flying machine before he knew how to fly it, and had a friend scheduled to come give him lessons. But after watching movies of others flying, he got impatient and started experimenting and ended up teaching himself.

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Floating above Trillium.



Voss hauls in his chute after a flight.



Voss takes a turn around his farm's windmill.

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"I learned off a video," he said.

Obviously, being comfortable with heights is one requirement for a paraglider pilot. Voss said even though he's not afraid of heights, "The first time I went up, my knees shook like they've never shaken in my life."

Because the paraglider has a top speed of 24 mph, and because a pilot in trouble can always glide down and land almost anywhere, Voss said there's few hazards that he worries about.

"You can walk home," he said. "And you can crash into trees and climb down ... Powerlines, you can see them good. Every house has a power line, so don't forget that."

"The weather's a big deal," Voss said. "I try to check the weather every time on the internet."

In fact, if you research paragliding on the Web, you'll run across accident reports that usually involve wind or bad weather. Voss said he likes flying in completely calm conditions.

"Usually in the evenings," he said. "Because there's no wind."

Voss said he's flown as far as 60 miles and as high as 6,400 feet.

"The higher the safer, it's just like in an airplane," he said. "The lower, the more fun. I see plenty of deer and turkey. Deer, they'll look around and not know which way to go, they can't tell where you are."

He said he wears a helmet and hearing protection.

"It's like riding Harley Davidson, without it, your ears are just ringing when you get home."

Although Voss said he has flown from his Hatchett Creek farm to Lake Martin, he usually loads his paraglider into the bed of a pickup truck and drives to the lake before a flight.

"Usually I take off at that big open area at The Ridge," Voss said, explaining that he has the permission from fellow flight enthusiast and Russell Lands Chairman Ben Russell. "I take off at the airport sometimes."



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