

BIG WALKER MOUNTAIN

A Hidden Jewel

by Richard Cobb



The cow pies are gone from the LZ, which most days more closely resembles a well-kept golf course than a country pasture. The launch is a wide, grassy slot with a park-like spacious setup area. And it is situated in some of the prettiest country in the eastern US—or the world, for that matter. On the drive down the lush green rural road to the Big Walker flying site, the locals have erected a sign: “Welcome to Big Walker Creek Valley—where hundreds live the way millions wish they could.”

The landowner of both the launch and LZ is Jim Bogle, and he has a dream of a world-class flight park. He is building it in hopes that they will come.

Big Walker is part of the Appalachian chain of mountains that extends from Pennsylvania to Georgia. Record sailplane flights have been made along these parallel ridges. If you pick the right fall day, you may be lucky enough to fly in the midst of the hawk migration—one hawk after another streaming past you on the ridge—all day long, as you soar above spectacular fall foliage.

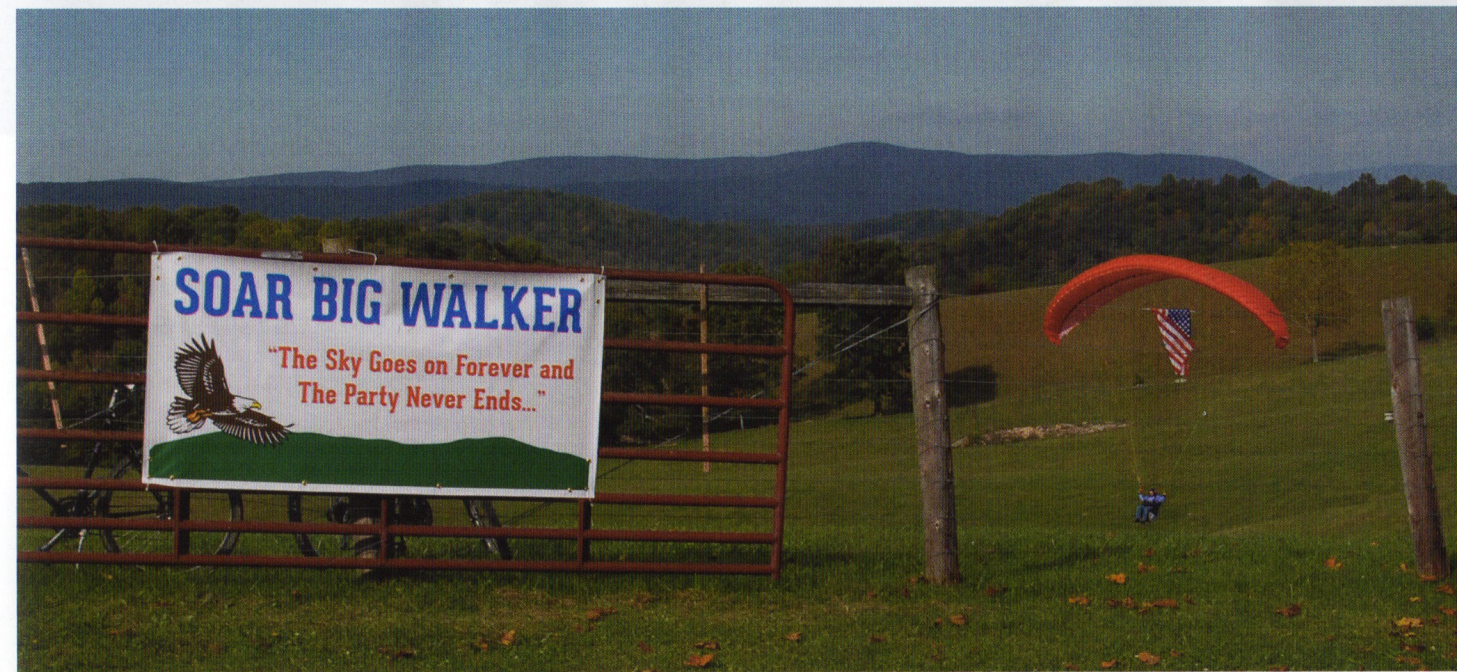
BIG WALKER MOUNTAIN

Big Walker Mountain has hosted legendary flying sites for 40 years. The 30-mile long, unbroken

ridge (100 miles if you jump several gaps) has had four different launches at different locations over that period of time. This is the area where the Skywalkers Club formed around 1975, a place where would-be pilots attempted to launch between the passing cable cars of a scenic tram. Some of the launches were successful, while many ended up providing additional color for the tourists, after pilots flopped into the rhododendrons.

From that beginning, Big Walker evolved into a legendary site, with pilots coming from many neighboring states on days with a NW forecast. On the right days now, anything is possible: a 30-mile easy ridge run, mile-plus altitude gains, or an over-the-back over beautiful farmland. Many XC flights have made it across the North Carolina border (at least 60 miles), or farther. Similar ridge soaring distances are possible, if you cross some gaps and marginal landing areas.

In the late 1980s, the launch location moved a number of miles down the ridge after some timber clear-cutting opened up a new possibility. This is when Jim and Erma Bogle’s part of the Big Walker story begins. Jim and Erma owned the LZ property at the time, but not the launch, which was adjacent to one of the few roads that traverse Big Walker Mountain. They loved having pilots land in their LZ and were very welcoming hosts. When local work parties were scheduled,



everyone knew they could count on eating a delicious meal of Erma’s “southwest chili,” cornbread, and other goodies.

When the elderly launch owner died, his family was not enthusiastic about continuing to allow their property to be used for flying, nor were they interested in selling even a small portion of it. And so Big Walker was lost as a flying site.

But Jim and Erma loved hosting their pilots. They did own land all the way to the top of the mountain, but there was no access to it from the road. The Forest Service, however, owned the land on the back side of the mountain, so Jim went to work on them. Eventually, he obtained a road permit to allow him to harvest timber from his property at the top of the mountain (wink, wink). And harvest timber he did, resulting in a beautiful wide slot at a high point of the mountain, which

was even better than the previous location.

The local flying community came together and contributed nearly \$10,000 for equipment rental and supplies (bulldozer and other equipment, gravel for the road, grass seed). In 2003, the new launch was open for flying again. But sadly, there were few pilots to fly it. During the time Big Walker had been closed, other sites had opened, and many of the Big Walker regulars had either quit flying after lengthy flying careers, or

LEFT The local Amish are frequent spectators. **TOP** How far do you want to go? Ideal conditions on a long ridge. **BOTTOM** The gate into the LZ, with a paraglider on final. **PREVIOUS PAGE** A paraglider soars over the Big Walker launch. Photos by Richard Cobb.



BIG WALKER MOUNTAIN FACES NW (FLYABLE W TO N)

Steep and wide slope launch for hang gliders and paragliders

900' elevation above LZ, -5:1 glide

Large manicured LZ with up-slope landings in all directions, and two flat areas for wheel landings. The site has three port-a-johns, picnic tables, free firewood, fire-pit, free camping electricity, running water and heated shower.

H-3/P-3 required, although experienced H-2/P-2 can fly in the right conditions and with an experienced local mentor. Must be current USHPA member and fly with helmet and reserve parachute.

Daily flying fees are \$30. Annual dues are \$100.

GPS (LZ): N37.13317047973985, W80.8973991620129

On I-77 in Virginia, take exit 52 onto Route 42 at Bland, Virginia. Travel east on Route 42 for 10 miles, then take a right fork on Route 738. Follow Route 738 for 3.7 miles. Take a left onto State Route 670 (Mt. Zion Rd.). The LZ is 0.5 miles on the left. Jim Bogle's house is across the road from the LZ.

Jim's phone number: (276) 688-4969

<https://groups.yahoo.com/neo/groups/SoarBigWalker/info>
<http://bigwalker.com>

moved away.

With few pilots to fly and maintain the site, the brush grew and began to choke the launch slot, and the road was often overgrown. Jim was distressed that the site was not being maintained up to his high standards, so several years ago he took matters into his own hands.

Anyone wishing to fly Big Walker now is required to join Jim's club—The Soar Big Walker Sky Pirates—and pay an annual fee, in return for which Jim and some local Amish farmers he hires do all of the site maintenance. Day passes are also available.

Jim's dream is to create a world-class flight park, and he is well on his way to realizing that dream. He moved the cows from the LZ and keeps it mowed to carpet-like quality. The site provides an ample camping area, with water and a heated shower. Many hang gliders prefer to land on the side of a hill in the rolling LZ, so Jim provides an ATV and glider cart to pick them up and haul them back to the breakdown area. On days when a lot of pilots are present (such as one of the Big Walker fly-ins), Jim has a special trailer that can haul a dozen or more gliders up the mountain, freeing setup space on the top of the mountain and eliminating retrieve hassles. He has large storage containers in the LZ where pilots can congregate during a rain shower, and includes rental glider racks in them for long-term glider storage. For an

LEFT Watching the sunset over the long ridge | photo by Richard Cobb. **BELOW** The author launching | photo by Jean Cobb.

annual fee, pilots can leave their gliders stored at the site, instead of hauling them back and forth each visit.

The site is excellent for both hang gliding and paragliding. The launch faces a few degrees N of NW, but is flyable in W to N. The best days are post-cold-front passage with the unstable clear air that follows the passage. At some times of the year these conditions can be strong, with only the most daring willing to tackle the mid-day thermals. On those days, the rewards can be great, with 5000'+ gains and the opportunity to go as far as your skill, and luck, allow. For the more cautious, later on the same day can result in some spectacular evening flights in more mellow air that can still offer gains of three or four thousand feet. At other times of the year, or during milder fronts, conditions can be good for everyone all day long.

Jim built it. Y'all need to come fly it. Watch for passage of cold fronts through the area (or NW wind patterns), bring your camping gear, and stay for a few days. If you come once, you'll be back.

Big Walker is located in the SW Virginia panhandle, just a few miles south of West Virginia. 🇺🇸

In 2014 **JIM AND ERMA BOGLE** received USHPA's Recognition of Special Contribution Award, after overwhelming support from the local flying community. Unfortunately, Erma did not live to see the award. The flying community extended their deepest condolences when she died in 2013.

