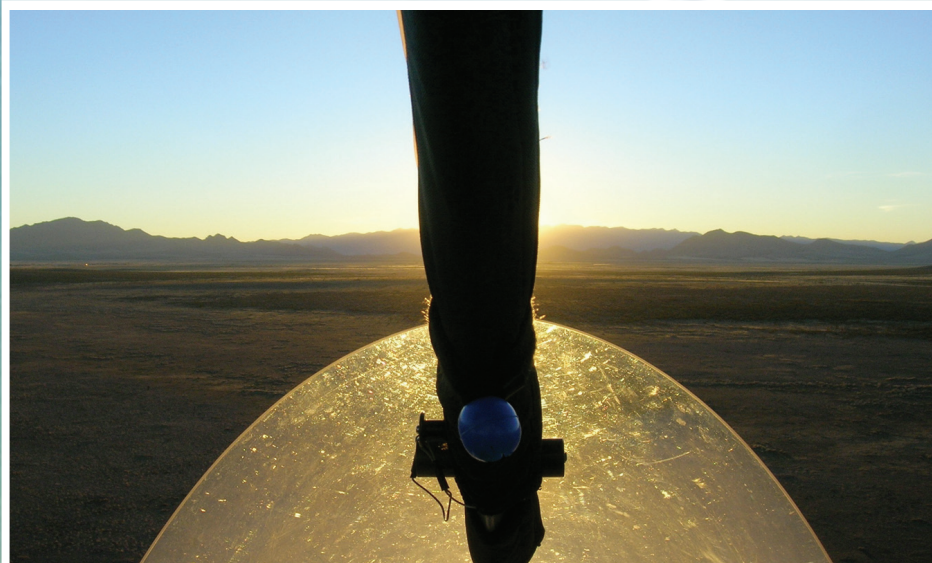


New Mexico Cross-Country Roping Rodeo

STORY AND PHOTOS BY JEFF GILKEY

"I climbed high and headed east towards the Rio Grande River, mentally shifting from one dirt road out-landing to the next until reaching Elephant Butte Lake where I dropped down and cruised along the beach. The water and air were glassy smooth. A flock of birds flew with me for a while, and then headed for the deep water at the center of the lake."



"We were running out of daylight," Gilkey remembers. "As the miles ground by, my arms grew tired from pulling on the control bar, but I knew I only had to do this for 2 hours. We were also flying directly into the sun. I flew with one eye closed and the other behind the nose tube. It was a great relief when the sun dropped behind the mountains on the horizon and I could see again. Rodeo, New Mexico, should be just beyond the pass in the mountains ahead."

Time was running out. Pulling my control bar into my gut, I could inch my ground speed up to 40 mph against a 25-mph headwind. It was 4:20 p.m., and my GPS estimated time en route (ETE) to Rodeo, New Mexico, showed 2 hours and 10 minutes. That would put me on the ground at 30 minutes past sunset, just barely legal, but I wasn't worried about that. I was worried about finding a small, unlit dirt runway in the middle of nowhere in the last fading light of day. Frank Dempsey wanted to turn back for Deming, New Mexico, but Rick Cooper and I argued for flying for at least 1 hour. If the winds stayed the same or eased off, we would be fine. And if we had to turn back, at least we would have a good tailwind back to Deming.

Rick was ahead on his faster Astra wing. Although Frank and I both fly Aeros Stream wings, I pulled ahead of him. Motivated by fear of landing in the dark, I had dropped down to 50 feet agl, wrapped my arms around the control bar, pulled in hard and held it there. This was going to be a long 2 hours.

Rick, Frank and I had been attempting this trip to the far southwest corner of New Mexico since December '07. We had all read the magazine articles and watched the YouTube videos of the Sky Gypsies and John McAfee's flight park down in Rodeo. Neil Bungard, one of the original Sky Gypsies, is our Sport Pilot Examiner and he invited Frank to visit McAfee's flight park at the CFI clinic held in Rodeo in

November '07.

Temperatures hovering at 8° forced us to cancel the trip in December and high winds forced us to cancel again the first weekend in February '08. This weekend, February 8-10, looked good.

Frank and Rick planned to wait for the temperatures to warm up a little and leave Double Eagle at 9 a.m., meeting me in Belen before 10 a.m. After a refueling stop at my hangar, we would head down to Truth or Consequences (TorC) and on to Rodeo. The distance from Belen to

Rodeo was 270 miles. We expected to arrive by 4 p.m.

When 10 a.m. rolled by, I was still waiting for Frank and Rick. Rick's wife Denise drove up to my hangar and called Rick on her cell phone. It was windy at Double Eagle and they were reluctant to take off without knowing how bad it was in Belen. I let Denise tell Rick it was calm – Rick would believe her. By the time they reached Belen, the winds had picked up for me, blowing 15 cross for my takeoff. Rick and Frank passed overhead, skipping the stop at Belen to save time and a crosswind landing.

We were moving fast with a 25-mph tailwind. I talked Frank out of landing at Socorro to check his gas. The Socorro airport is tucked in close to a rugged 2,000-foot-high mountain and it would be rough down there. We pressed on to our first refueling stop at TorC. We followed I-25 for a while, but it was not a realistic emergency out-landing option. I climbed high and headed east towards the Rio Grande River, mentally shifting from one dirt road land-out to the next until I reached Elephant Butte Lake. At the lake, I dropped down and cruised along the beach. The water and air were glassy smooth. A flock of birds

flew with me for a while, and then headed for the deep water at the center of the lake. I did not want to follow them there.

I had a little trouble lining up on the runway at TorC. When I taxied past the windsock, I found out why. The wind had shifted 180° while I was on final. We met Denise, refueled and took a short break. We were behind schedule, but we had more than 4 hours of daylight left with only 125 miles between Rodeo and us.

We flew around the town of TorC, past Caballo Lake and into the Hatch Valley. Frank's regular fuel gauge had been flakey, so he was using totalized fuel flow to monitor his fuel situation. At TorC it was reading high, so he shifted the scale factor and 45 minutes later, his gauge was reading zero. Obviously it was a bad scale factor, but he couldn't deal with the psychological torture of staring at an empty fuel gauge. He wanted to land at Deming and check his fuel.

While Rick and Frank landed at Deming, I went north to check out Cooke's Peak, which can be seen for 100 miles in southern New Mexico. I grew up in nearby El Paso, and couldn't pass up the chance to take a close look at the summit. Frank and Rick were still on the ground when I reached Deming, so I landed to get



Jeff Gilkey with his Aerotrike Cobra.

them moving. When I taxied up on the ramp, Frank had just topped off his gas tank. I turned right around and headed back out to the runway.

Leaving Deming, we felt the full force of the headwind, pointed exactly along our course line to Rodeo. I glanced down at my GPS ETE to Rodeo. It would be close; we were running out of daylight. As the miles ground by, my arms grew tired from pulling on the control bar, but I knew I only had to do this for 2 hours. And at the end of twilight, I would be grateful for every minute gained earlier in the flight. After an hour, my ground speed slowly inched up, I could easily maintain 40 mph and grunt my way up to 45. My ETA was slowly shifting forwards. Soon I was doing 55 mph and my ETA was 10 minutes after sunset. We were gonna make it.

One last challenge: we were flying directly into the sun. I flew with one eye closed and the other behind the nose tube. It was a great relief when the sun dropped behind the mountains on the horizon and I could see again. Rodeo should be just beyond the pass in the mountains ahead. I saw a hangar with a huge flag next to it. That was McAfee's private hangar and runway next to his sprawling estate. I circled to let him know we were there, then headed on to Amigos de Cielo Airport (NM90), home of the Sky Gypsies. The airport was exactly where my GPS said it should be. I landed at 12 minutes after sunset, with a whole 18 minutes to spare. This was probably the most grueling cross-country flight I had ever made, battling rotors, winds and racing the setting sun. I loved it.

Once we were safely on the ground, Rick and I couldn't resist hassling Frank about his fuel gauge problems and the extra gas stop at Deming that pushed us to the limit. But in all fairness, I couldn't really fault Frank. Rick and I had dragged him a little beyond his comfort zone on this long-distance cross-country flight. Frank is an experienced CFI, but he spends most of his time in the pattern at Double Eagle training students. He never worries about gas because he just fills up at the beginning of the flight. Without an accurate fuel gauge, he would be pushing his luck to fly 4 hours without checking his gas.

McAfee came over and welcomed us to his trike-flying paradise in Rodeo and offered to take us on a tour the next afternoon. We grabbed dinner at the Sky Gypsy Café, and settled into the Airstream trailers that served as guest quarters at Rodeo. I looked forward to some great flying the next day.

Sky Gypsies Heaven

I got up a little after sunrise and looked around. This was trike pilot heaven. Rick and I were in the air early to explore the Chiricahua Mountains west of Rodeo.



Rick Cooper finishes preparations for this New Mexico cross-country flight in his Astra trike.



Frank Dempsey ready to fly his Aeros trike from Double Eagle to Rodeo, New Mexico.

Frank wanted to get gas in town, so we told him to radio us when he was in the air.

To the west was a huge mountain, obviously the Chiricahuas. A few minutes later, I was amazed to discover it was a lowly foothill. The main mountain behind it was 100 times larger with a vertical rise of 6,000 feet from the valley floor. Around the corner I could see the pinnacles of stone and steeply walled cliffs of Cave Creek Canyon. We followed the canyon west, gaining altitude along the way. I had heard stories of how McAfee and the Sky Gypsies cruise down these canyons at low altitude, running the canyons like a giant ski slalom in the air. I was content to gaze down on them from 2,000 feet agl.

Cave Creek Canyon fanned out into hundreds of smaller canyons in an immense pine forest. I couldn't believe there were this many trees in southern New Mexico. Correction, we were in Arizona now. We had crossed the state line a few miles east of the Amigos del Cielo airport. These mountains were the last strongholds of the Apache and I could see why. Geronimo surrendered near here, south of Rodeo.

I looked back down Cave Creek Canyon from the summit ridgeline and noticed a high point on the far side of the canyon. This was the foothill I had seen from Rodeo earlier, the "mountain" I had mistaken for the entire Chiricahua range. At the top of the ridgeline was a fire lookout station. It had the best view in the world, except for the view Rick and I had from our trikes.

The air was calm up here, so we went over the back, gliding down towards a protrusion of the grasslands. Once we reached the tall grass of the plains, we relaxed and cruised along at 50 feet agl, circling the Chiricahuas in a wide arc to the south.

I followed a canyon that took me back to the east side of the Chiricahuas and headed back north towards Rodeo. Cruising along at 8,500 feet, I flew by a dozen deep mysterious canyons, each beckoning me to explore them further. There was just too much scenery down here, and I had to pass them by. I landed at Amigos del Cielo after a perfect morning 2.5-hour flight. Frank was on the ground waiting for us. He'd had a nice flight over the pinnacles of Cave Creek. We drove into town for lunch and got gas for the trikes. When we returned to Sky Gypsies, all I could think of was getting back into that warm, 70° air.

Parked next to our hangar was a giant

roller machine used by the Sky Gypsy team to transform the sandy soil into a perfect dirt runway. When Frank was in Rodeo for CFI training last November, he watched a beautiful, naked Sky Gypsy princess drive the roller back and forth over the runway. The image seems to have been permanently etched into his memory. Every time we walked by the roller, Frank stared at it with a grin on his face. Sadly, the princess was not there that day.

McAfee met us at the hangars for his promised tour. We launched and followed him towards the Peioncillo Mountains, east of the Sky Gypsy complex. I used to think Frank and I flew low over the desert, but I never saw anyone fly as low as McAfee, just barely clearing the tops of the yucca stalks. I was in the number-2 spot, right behind McAfee as he led us between two pillars of rock that formed a natural "gate." McAfee poked his nose into a series of canyons to test the winds, and then withdrew, saying it wasn't right. Finally satisfied, he told me to hang back and circle at the entrance. I watched McAfee enter the canyon at high speed and execute a perfect Chandelle turn to exit the canyon. There was little margin for error. I circled up and entered the canyon 1,000 feet higher, barely poked my nose in and turned around; that was enough excitement for me.

McAfee said it was getting too bumpy for any more canyon antics, so we headed back to Rodeo. Everyone landed and rehashed the flight for a few minutes, then after thanking McAfee for his hospitality, the three of us took off for a sunset flight along the Peioncillo ridgeline. The air was perfect and smooth. As I watched the sun set, my thoughts drifted back to yesterday's race with the setting sun and how different it was from this flight, 24 hours later. The Chiricahuas are the most beautiful mountains I have ever flown over. There is enough scenery for several days of flying, if not a lifetime.

The Playa and Reserve

Today's flight would take us along the western edge of New Mexico, "terra incognita" on my personal flying map. The weather forecast was good, with calm winds predicted for our refueling spot at Reserve, New Mexico. We thanked McAfee for his hospitality and said goodbye to Neil and the rest of the gang. We headed north for the Playas near Lordsburg. During the summer monsoon season the Playas are the largest lakes in New Mexico, but during the dry winter months, they transform into the largest landing strips in the state. We were told they were safe to land on (if they were dry). The drill was to gently touch one wheel down on the surface and if a puff of dust rose, it was safe to land on. If not, get out of there.

Always ready to land off-field, Frank was the perfect person to have along on this trip. Being careful to stay clear of his prop wash, I followed behind him and saw a small cloud of dust appear when he touched a wheel down. Rick took it one step further with a full-stop landing on the surface. He radioed that it was hard as



An old, rickety bridge spans the Rio Grande River.



After arriving at Rodeo, Jeff Gilkey, Frank Dempsey and Rick Cooper had dinner at the Sky Gypsy Café (left) before settling into Airstream trailers (right) that serve as guest quarters at Rodeo.



concrete. That was all I needed to hear. I glided down and landed next to him. Then Frank, who was circling above us, alerted us to a herd of cattle stampeding our way.

I'm not joking about the stampede. The herd was in a full run towards us. Neil had warned us that local ranchers drop hay on the Playas during the winter. The cattle have been conditioned to think that any motorized vehicle (pickup truck or trike) means food! Rick and I didn't want to deal with cows eating our wings or chewing on the propellers, so we cleared out when they were about 30 yards away.

We followed I-10 east towards the Lordsburg Airport. Denise met us there with

planes that had crashed here. Before we became too discouraged, Denise arrived with fuel. Frank was first up for takeoff. He seemed to take forever to climb away from the runway. Frank radioed that he felt some strong ground suck at the end of the runway. Rick taxied out next, then immediately returned to the parking area. He had a flat tire. I radioed to Frank circling above that it would be awhile before we could take off. I half expected Frank to head for home alone, but in an amazing display of team loyalty, Frank braved the rotors again for another landing (and future takeoff)

at Reserve. I pulled my tire inflator out of my storage compartment and we pumped up Rick's flat tire. We were lucky; it held pressure.

Frank declared he was launching last, ensuring he wouldn't have to make three takeoffs and landings at Reserve. Rick got off cleanly, but he warned me to taxi all the way back. I pulled in on my ground roll, waiting to rotate until reaching 60 mph. I popped the control bar and rocketed into the air. No ground suck for me.

We continued north up a wide valley. I would like to return during the summer when the land is greener, but even in winter it was very beautiful. We had a 10-mph tailwind, not enough to generate strong rotors, but I stayed above the mountains to be sure. Finally, I could see the vast expanse of the Plains of San Agustin. They seemed to stretch forever. From here, the mountains on the opposite edge were 50 miles away. At the center of this basin are the antennas of the Very Large Array (VLA), an astronomical radio observatory.

I saw a herd of pronghorn antelope and radioed to Frank and Rick. There was no reply. Maybe they weren't



Rick and Frank landed at Deming to check the fuel gauge on Frank's trike, so Jeff went north to check out Cookes Peak, which can be seen for 100 miles in southern New Mexico. "I had grown up in nearby El Paso and couldn't pass up the chance to take a close look at the summit," says Jeff.

some hi-test gas for Rick's HKS engine. From Lordsburg we flew north to the Gila River. To continue on to Reserve, we had to make an 8-mile jump over the "Gila Box." I had scouted this stretch beforehand using Google Earth, and knew I would have an easy glide to a farm field downstream or upstream of the box the entire time. I climbed to 9,000 feet for this hop over the scenic and hostile terrain.

Once across, we turned north, following U.S. 180 up the center of a wide valley. I crossed over to the east side of the valley to get a closer look at peaks on the edge of the Gila Wilderness. At the head of the valley, the San Francisco River cut a deep canyon to the west. From here we had to make another 8-mile hop. Our road followed a narrow winding canyon, with one "for extreme emergency use only" landing zone by a rest stop clearing at the midpoint. I climbed to 10,000 feet for this hop and once I passed the rest stop, I had a clear glide to some flat fields south of Reserve.

My side trips to look at the scenery put me 10 miles behind Frank and Rick.



"I could see the pinnacles of stone and steeply walled cliffs of Cave Creek Canyon," says Jeff. "We followed the canyon west, gaining altitude along the way."

interested. After a while it became apparent that my push-to-talk button was not working. Later, Rick tried to contact me on the radio. I tried keying my mike, but he didn't pick up anything. Rick told Frank he was flying back along the southwest leg of the VLA to find me. When I heard this, I lined up on the leg and he soon spotted me. I heard him say, "Guess he's okay, except for some radio problems." I followed Rick and Frank silently past the VLA antennas and out of the basin to the north.

We flew past Ladron Peak and on to Belen. The winds were calm, the air smooth; the temps were a warm 60°. With my radio out of order, I followed Frank into the pattern and landed while Rick continued north to Double Eagle because of his flat tire. Frank refueled then followed him.

Trip Thoughts

Long cross-country trips are much safer in a group compared to going it alone, and a lot more fun. We stuck together, and if one of us had experienced trouble in the boonies, we were prepared to camp in the desert. I had a great time on this trip, and for once, I was the first one to push his trike into the hangar.

Note: Although the Sky Gypsies are organized as a private club with a ring of airports and hangars in southern Arizona and New Mexico, the facilities at Rodeo are open to the public. They are a great friendly group and the scenery is spectacular. Be sure to call ahead first so they can reserve a spot for you in the hangars and the trailers. There is no gas at Sky Gypsies, but regular gas is available a few miles down the road in Rodeo. Info: www.skygypsies.com • e-mail: visitors@skygypsies.com .

JEFF GILKEY, trike pilot from Albuquerque, New Mexico, flew hang gliders during the '80s and '90s before taking a 12-year break to raise some kids and dogs. He started flying trikes in '04 and still feels like every flight is an adventure. You can enjoy his trips vicariously through his Website: www.jeffsflightlog.com .



The wing on Rick's trike glows delicately in the light of a setting sun.

"We headed north for the Playas near Lordsburg. During the summer monsoon season the Playas are the largest lakes in New Mexico, but during the dry-winter months, they transform into the largest landing strips in the state. We were landing and taking off from the Playas, when Frank alerted us to a herd of cattle stampeding our way. Local ranchers drop hay on the Playas during the winter and the cattle have been conditioned to think that any motorized vehicle (pickup truck or trike) means food! Since we didn't want to deal with cows eating our wings or chewing on the propellers, we cleared out when they were about 30 yards away."



This is Rodeo, a little town literally in the southwest corner of New Mexico.



Sky Gypsies is a private club with a ring of airports and hangars in southern Arizona and New Mexico. While the facilities at Rodeo are open to the public, be sure to call ahead to reserve a spot in the hangars and the trailers.



On their return flight home, the trio stopped at Reserve, New Mexico, to refuel.