



PILOT SPOTLIGHT: ROB CONDELLA

BY LIZ DENGLER

I'm originally from Scranton, Pennsylvania, but currently, I live wherever my van is parked. For the last three years, I've been living in my van and floating around the U.S., focusing on flying and traveling with my paramotor.

When I need a break or reset and plan for another trip, there is an excellent flying spot in Jersey Shore, Pennsylvania, where I can camp out for a while. It's a beautiful and quiet place to fly over the rolling hills and cornfields, and it is close enough to visit my family. I'm friends with the few guys that fly there, and the airport owner is fine with me sleeping in my van—it's a pretty sweet setup.

I learned to fly from Noah Rasheta down in the Cancun region of Mexico. I was friends with him online for a while beforehand through similar hobbies unrelated to paramotoring. When I realized he flew motors and offered training, I thought I should investigate further—he seemed like

a nice guy, so I decided to head to Mexico and give it a shot.

The first time I saw a paramotor in person was when I went for training. I was looking for something different and to change things up a bit in my life, so I just figured I'd give it a shot, and maybe I would get a new hobby. Of course, as happens to many of us, I fell in love with it, and it's sort of consumed my daily life. Now, I've been flying for three and a half years.

Outside of flying, my background is in mechanical engineering. I worked as a pharmaceutical engineer for about ten years, focusing on instrumentation to support flu vaccine production. About a year ago, I had a few life changes and decided to take some time off. I hit the road in my van and focused on flying as much as possible. I coined it my radical sabbatical.

I do a lot of solo trips and have always been that person with those crazy trip ideas. That said, I love taking trips with



other people, but finding someone up for it can be challenging. So, I try to be that person for others. If you've got a great idea for a trip, I'm usually more than happy to jump on board and help figure out the logistics!

My favorite flight was in Thorsmork Valley, Iceland, on a day with wonderfully calm conditions. After launching, I followed this glacial melt river to a beautiful waterfall (maybe 200 feet high) and flew over it a few times, pulling big diving turns off the edge of it. From there, I climbed past the cliffs and along the glacier straight to the top. There were broken clouds at the summit, and I could see everything before me, from the crevasses in the glacier to the zebra stripping in the lava rocks and the landscape beyond. I flew to the backside to descend, and things brightened up as I dropped into the canyons below. They were filled with hidden waterfalls that you could only see from that vantage point, and the colors were mesmerizing; the



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whitewater from the rivers, the white of the snow, the black lava rock, and patches of this super vibrant green moss. It was a euphoric flight that just hasn’t been topped.

I fly a Parajet Maverick and, as a BGD team pilot, fly a BGD Luna. The Luna is a friendly, stable cross-country glider but still playful. It’s treated me well on all my trips.

As much as I love my equipment, if I could improve one thing about the sport, it would be the gear. Even though things have improved, there is always room for improvement. The passive safety and technology of gliders are amazing, and I hope the trend continues. The sticking point with many pilots is trusting their motors and feeling like they can do long, adventurous flights without an

engine out and needing to constantly plan for an emergency landing. I have not had an issue with my motors yet, but I know it happens. I would like to see the focus placed on improving the overall reliability of the gear.

The best mistake I ever made, I was fortunate to walk away from. I’ve learned it is a fairly common mistake among motor pilots—certainly more common than it should be. In my first year of flying, I was at my home site working on learning wingovers. I had to get to work but wanted to get in one more lap before heading out. I did three towards the end of my run and got pretty close to the ground. On the last one, I had just a moment of hesitation, resulting in poor energy management, and when I swung around, the whole paramotor had a rock to it. I was full throttle coming

out of my wingover while the motor rocked, and all of a sudden, I found myself sideways and had a three-second fall before crashing into the corn below.

I was in complete shock that I’d hit the ground. I killed the motor and didn’t move until I did a whole system body check. Surprisingly, I was okay. Late for work and concerned someone might be calling emergency services, I quickly packed up my gear. As I packed, I noticed that one side of my glider was detached from my motor. I did a quick inspection, but everything seemed fine, so I hurried out and decided to analyze the situation later. Luckily, I had been recording with my GoPro, and it caught a perfectly framed image of what happened—you see everything. It turns out I didn’t fully clip my riser into the carabiner, and it came detached on that last wingover when that side of the glider was unweighted.

After the incident, I got back in the air as soon as my motor was fixed, but it took me a little time to feel confident again. Any time I’d hit a wake or a bump and get that slight slack sensation, I felt a bit of unease.

I felt a bit embarrassed about the incident, but I still shared the story with other pilots, and I was amazed by how many replied simply, “Oh, that’s happened to me.” It even happened to a friend of mine who is an instructor about a week after I told him the story. He said it was the longest glide down to the LZ he’s ever experienced. It’s apparent this can be an issue across all experience levels. I triple-check my biners now.

My next adventure is flying the pyramids in Egypt in October. I know it’s a bucket list item for many pilots, and I’m stoked that I get to spend so much time there. I’m doing a couple of two-week-long trips around the pyramids and to the white desert, where I’ll get to meet pilots from all over the world. It will be an incredible experience, and I hope to come away with unforgettable memories, friends, and some stunning photos.

Five years from now, I plan to be doing a lot of adventure flying in different parts of the world. I take a lot of photos, so when I’m flying, I often think, “How can I capture how cool this is? Or how can I represent how much fun we’re having in a photo?”

Moving forward, I would love to get more into free flight because I think it will make me a more well-rounded pilot with a better understanding of the weather, thermalling, and all-around knowledge and experience. Down the line, I might also do a bit of teaching for the same reason, but I’m not ready to take that on fully just yet.

