



Jim Thoreson snapped this photo of a Cherokee Six plane he landed at the Ram Falls airstrip this summer. PHOTO COURTESY OF JIM THORESON

Abandoned airstrip favoured by aviators

Ram Falls once highest elevation airstrip in Canada

BY LAURA BUTTON
EDITOR

When pilot John Radomsky sets his Cessna 185 down at the Ram Falls airstrip, he's entering a fantasy world.

"Theoretically, it doesn't exist," he says, of the 3,300-foot airstrip along Hwy. 754 at the north fork of the Ram River. "It's a patch of grass that's just perfect for landing on."

The Ram Falls airstrip unfurls just over a mile above sea level. At 5,350 feet, it was once the highest elevation airstrip listed in the Canadian Flight Supplement. The airstrip is listed as abandoned on aeronautical maps now, but is still used by pilots all over central Alberta.

The strip was abandoned by the Alberta Forestry Service in the 1990s when fixed-wing aircraft gave way to helicopters as the preferred means of accessing remote lookouts. The Red Deer Flying Club has had an official agreement since 2002 to use and maintain the strip.

The annual maintenance agreement and flight authority agreement with Alberta Forestry and Parks allows volunteers to cut the grass, collect garbage and install a full-sized windsock.

"It takes very minimal maintenance," says Radomsky.

He or another member of the Red Deer, Innisfail or Lacombe flying clubs will take the long drive to Ram Falls once a year with a lawn tractor in the back of a truck. It's a slow drive compared to the easy 40-minute flight in his Cessna, but a trip that is well worth the effort for a summer of aero-access to this remote strip.

Occasionally they organize a fly-in picnic, like the one held on Aug. 29. Pilots from Red Deer, Innisfail and Lacombe descended on the strip that day for a barbecue lunch – more traffic in a single morning than the strip may otherwise see all week.

Jim Thoreson is the president of the Red Deer Flying Club, and the zone training officer for the Civil Air Search and Rescue Association.

"It's a good emergency airstrip," he says, not only available to pilots in distress, but also to search teams and pilots in training.

He uses the airstrip to train pilots in mountain civilian air SAR methods. They don't land, but will fly low over the strip to check for aircraft in trouble.

The Prairie Bible Institute uses the strip as part of their mission pilot training, and novice pilots will sometimes visit as part of their mountain check, part of their pilot training.

The real draw for Radomsky is recreational. A



John Radomsky and Jim Thoreson in front of Radomsky's Cessna 185. Radomsky flies to Ram Falls every couple of weeks. He's even landed there in every month of the year.

PHOTOS BY LAURA BUTTON | THE MOUNTAINEER



The Red Deer Flying Club holds an annual maintenance agreement and flight authority agreement with Alberta Forestry and Parks.

15-minute walk from the airstrip will take you to Ram Falls. The river itself is a prime spot for fly fishing, and wildlife like elk, deer and bighorn sheep are in abundance.

In fact, the ungulates sometimes present a hazard to pilots. Radomsky remembers overshooting the runway when two bucks bounded across the runway. Another time, a cow elk stared him down, keeping him from taking off near her calf.

The only real problem the pilots have encountered over the years are the four-wheeled variety.

"When it's muddy, they can do a lot of damage," said Radomsky of the off-highway vehicle users and trucks that tear up the strip on occasion.

But typically, the strip is quiet, and pilots and their passengers get to enjoy the mountain air and rugged terrain of Ram River and Ram Falls.



The Ram Falls airstrip is just a 15-minute walk from the falls.



The 3300-foot airstrip is maintained by volunteers from the Red Deer and Innisfail Flying Clubs, though Radomsky says the local ungulate population helps out by grazing the airstrip. On Aug. 28, pilots from central Alberta gathered at the site for a fly-in picnic and barbecue lunch.