



We paragliders often make reference to the eagle, master of the sky, fierce and fearless. I often wonder if it's how we'd like to see ourselves. I've been a falconer since I was a teenager and I only took up paragliding because I heard about someone flying with an eagle. But I think if we're honest our self-image is way more like a rabbit than an eagle.

Trust your inner eagle!

Martin Cray overcomes his inner rabbit

Steve Ham suggested that paragliding was more like golf than snowboarding. He was explaining why the champs were not young hotheads but middle-aged thinkers, strategists, and tacticians instead. More like yachtsmen than skateboarders. Their years of experience creating a system, an autopilot almost, which controls things, not by utilising God-given skills and super-quick reactions, but by calling upon learnt behaviour to bypass time-consuming conscious thought and get on with the business of making things happen. Think more perfect putt than double back flip on the half-pipe.

So I should be fine, in the peak of it. The trouble was that my flying was starting to terrify me. As a 40-something pilot I had always thought that I was going against nature by still flying. According to current academic thinking, risk taking is the preserve of the young and testosterone-fuelled. At my age nature doesn't consider sudden impact with an immovable object a very fitting way to go. But Steve was suggesting that 18 years of experience should be a help, not a hindrance. I should be flying with confidence because all that knowledge would either kick in when I made an error or, better still, save me from making one in the first place.

Yet I was subconsciously avoiding every usable XC day, hoping for really light winds, secretly praying for spread-out or even rain, and when I did go up all I could do was battle to get down. I knew I should have all the skills and knowledge to make flying a truly ecstatic experience, but I was having real problems getting them to kick in because the fear was taking over. My inner rabbit was in danger of being transfixed by the headlamps of altitude. Then something extraordinary happened. I got a call from Adrian Thomas. "Would you like an eagle?"

Louise Crandall had been flying with Cossack, a Steppe Eagle, but was now trying to find him a new home. Unbeknown to me, Adrian and his team at Oxford had been studying flight behaviour with Cossack in Denmark. Now that the Danish authorities had declared the eagle an illegal immigrant, Adrian had suggested that I should be his new keeper. Many e-mails followed. I felt I had to let Louise know that I was no longer the naïve overly-confident pilot who'd filmed her and her colleagues in the PWC in the 90s. By early 2007 the truth was I that I was getting the willies if the wind went over 8mph or the thermals were going up at more than 150ft a minute. "Cossack will change all that," declared Louise. "In the meantime take your camera up with you and concentrate on getting really good pictures - you'll be surprised at what happens." I was intrigued, but needless to say I never got my camera out of the bag once airborne.

If I was to explain my loss of confidence over the years then I guess the obvious place to look would be any major incidents or traumas I'd had. There were only three in hundreds of hours of fairly regular flying. In the first I was at my most calm, in the second I'd recovered before I'd realised what had happened but was left shaken, and the third was totally pilot induced, an over-reaction to a minor incident and the only one where I actually hit the deck.

The first and most dramatic was flying lee side at Mont Cherie in strong thermals on an underweighted tandem. I got "whacked" as our American cousins would say, but finally got it back together just as I went through the treetops. I hadn't handled the incident correctly but Bruce Goldsmith kindly went up with me and showed me the error of my ways.

The second was more frightening, a total blowout flying XC in the valleys of South Wales in strong winds. I was only about 150 ft up, but thankfully the glider recovered with just enough height for me to convert the swing through into a landing. That one shook me up far more. I became wary of going anywhere near the lee of a hill, but a few years later I strayed and was rewarded with a gentle but definite full frontal. I panicked, pulled on way too much brake, stalled the glider and hit the ground on my back, hard. I only walked away because the ground was at such a steep angle that I bounced and rolled.

Looking back now it seems a fairly linear progression. The anxieties that gradually built up, undermining my confidence in my decision-making and my ability to deal with mistakes, contributed to me finally cocking it up far more than the conditions did.

Nonetheless I agreed to take on Cossack. After several years of failure, I had first attempted to fly with a Peregrine in 2001. Over the years I tried a Saker Falcon and then three Red Kites. I was determined to get this to work. I'd deal with my flying problems if and when they arose. A few months later the eagle arrived and Louise said her emotional goodbyes. At one point I doubted we'd ever get to fly him at all, let alone fly with him. But time and patience prevailed, and three months later I was standing at the training slope of Hay Bluff, hawking glove and dead day-old chick (standard hawk food) at the ready.

It was, thermic, windy, and well off the hill, but I took off. My one-size-too-big Gradient Aspen was instantly yawing and pitching all over the show. Catching thermals low down is always a bit interesting but trying to fly straight through them with only one hand on the controls is testing to say the least. The UK was enjoying some really good flying weather. I kept trying on the nursery slopes and Cossack kept ignoring me. A few people who

knew my flying suggested that perhaps I was pushing it a little, especially flying so low. Strangely I shrugged them off. Normally the least hint of possible danger was enough to ground me and find me rehearsing a convincing alibi.

Then I had a change of tack. I went to the top and followed Cossack instead of trying to get him to

Approaching base at Fochriw PHOTO: MARTIN CRAY

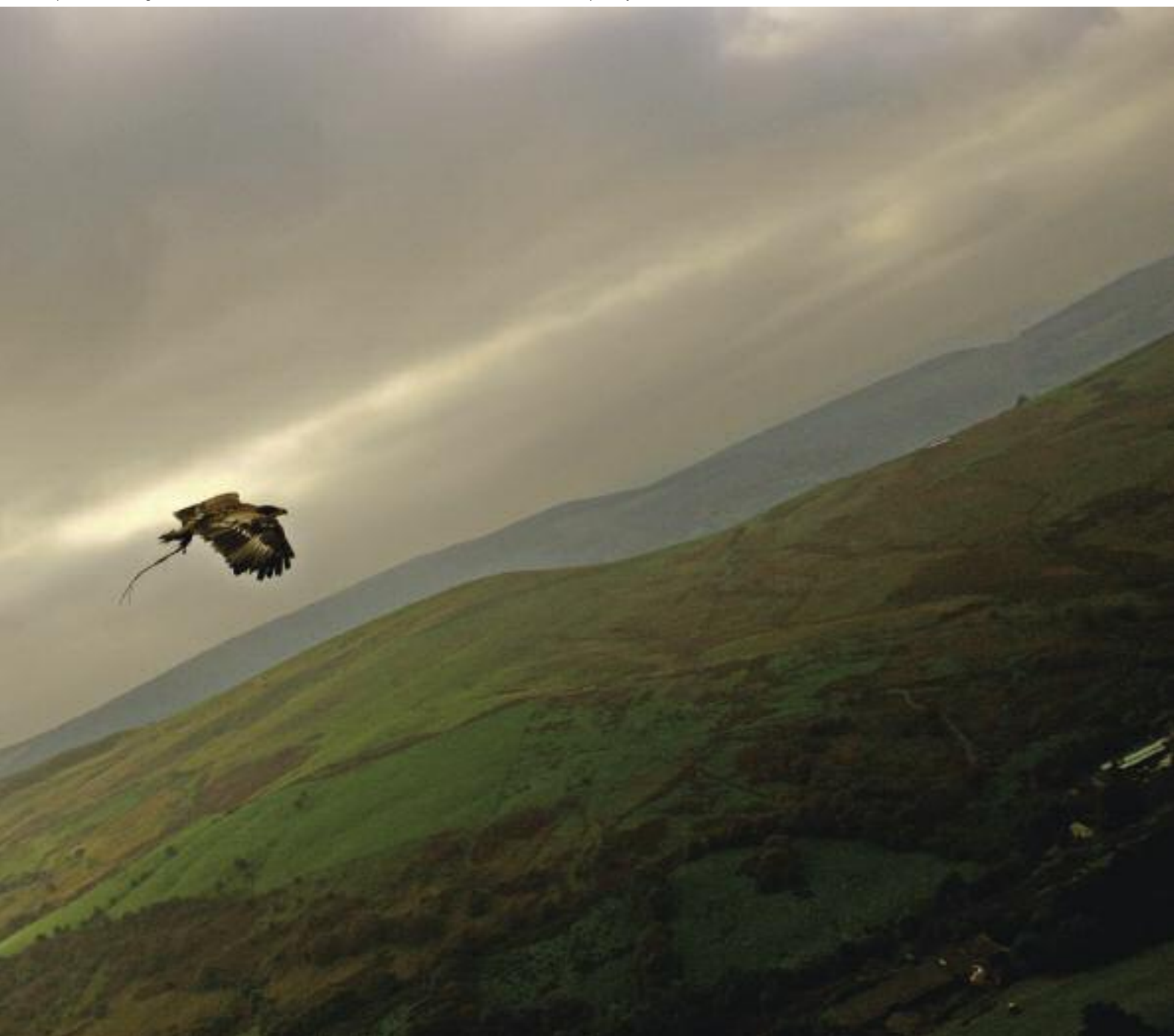


follow me. I borrowed Paul Williams' Sigma 6 - something that didn't constantly need both hands - and was able to concentrate on following Cossack, even outclimbing him on occasion. I'm pretty near the top of the weight range on the Sigma and it's solidity, speed, and high brake pressures really work for me. The Aspen gives a lot of feedback and is sensitive enough to sometimes overwhelm me with information. Being able to be brutal with the Sigma is a great outlet for all that nervous energy. I thought about Sandie Cochepain's comments on the *Performance Flying* DVD. "It's better to fly a lower performance glider 100 % than a higher-performance glider 60%."

A few days later I got a call from a production company about flying with the Red Kites I'd helped to train two years before. I was to be flying solo, guiding Steve Millson and the presenter on the tandem to where the kites were. It was one of those days where hang glider pilots do big distances and paragliders end up in hospital. Steve lent me an Ozone Element as I was going to need to be hands free a lot. At one point it got so strong that Steve landed the tandem and I was left alone a few hundred feet above the hill, politely declining the director's request to "...stay out in front" and "...a bit lower down." But we got the filming done, the day calmed a little, some other pilots joined us, and I

suddenly realised something wonderful - I was enjoying it. Like bouncing a raft out through the surf, this was exhilarating but in no way terrifying.

Over the following days I was often the first one up because I wanted some clear air in order to concentrate on getting close to Cossack. Instead of waiting to see if anybody else got a kicking before I took off I'd clip in and occasionally think "Yee-ha! Here we go," rather than "I knew I shouldn't have taken off." It's amazing quite how many hours I've sat on the hill watching other pilots boating around, convinced that they were hating it because their wings were pitching just a tiny little bit.





No rabbits: No rabbits in sight! PHOTO: KEVIN WALL

Paul Williams, Chris White, myself and a few other lucky pilots enjoyed flying with Cossack, but he wasn't really showing any inclination to land on my glove for food or even really to follow me, especially if I went to land. Scott Mason, who had put my attempts to shame with his parahawking successes in Nepal, came to stay for a few days to share his wisdom. Not being able to fly every day (unlike in Nepal) had been a major factor in my previous failures, but now I'd had weeks of continuous flying and still wasn't getting the desired result.

Scott suggested we went back a step or two. I asked local guru Julian Brown if he'd fly me on his tandem. We were getting the feel of the air, waiting for the eagle to be carried up by Jo Binns (ex hang glider legend and the hardest working falconer's assistant ever), and for the first time in weeks of continuous flying I felt uncomfortable. I thought about making excuses to land, started pointing out slightly darker clouds, etc. When finally the eagle was released and came to join us I was so tense I missed a golden filming opportunity.

That's when I had my epiphany. We had a job to do. Who's got time to be frightened? Strong lift? Cloud suck? Bring it on! We need to get up there with the eagle. Two days later I finally managed an XC flight. It was rough but manageable. Since then I have been enjoying what's left of the thermic weather. Keeping up with (if not looking down on) old flying buddies who'd long since given up on me. Most importantly I've been spending hours in the air and not been in any kind of a hurry to get back on terra firma. Instead of agreeing with the sceptics about how dodgy the sky looks, I've been taking off while they're still saying it's not flyable. I've been remembering why I love this so much. I've been trying not to land until dark and even then been desperate to get back up there the following day.

What I had inadvertently stumbled upon was the need to trust my autopilot - my inner eagle. By trying to call in the actual feathered eagle, or even just follow him, I had forced myself to allow my intuition to fly the glider while my conscious brain tried to solve the new puzzle of things like "Where is he now?" and "Which side should I call him in on?" When you're

racing a car you don't think about which foot to use on the clutch. It's the same deal. By focusing on a new task I was able to allow my experience to get on with controlling the wing while my conscious mind dealt with strategy, tactics, and all the things that thinking was designed for, instead of imagining all the terrible things that could go wrong.

When Jocky Sanderson suggests drinking or eating on transitions, it's not just to replenish the body but also to take your mind off the awe-inspiring sensation of being at cloudbase with very little to do. Just by fiddling with your Camelbak you free yourself from the perfectly rational fear of falling thousands of feet and allow your inner eagle to get on with flying the glider. Your mind is then free to meander into the world of forward thinking, planning and strategy.

So what can you do if your inner rabbit is taking over? I'm not suggesting that you get yourself an eagle. (Contact Scott Mason if you want try parahawking. If you really must take it up get an easy bird like a Harris Hawk.) What I am suggesting



Cossack likes to oversee the packing PHOTO: MARTIN CRAY



Adrian Thomas, Martin and Cossack climbing out at Pandy PHOTO: MARTIN CRAY

is a strategy which I stumbled upon, but is recommended by psychologist Sandy Britain.

- Fly a glider with less feedback.
- Fly in conditions you can easily get down from. Low winds or low cloudbase ain't for you if you're really nervous.
- If you do go to base and get the fear, check there isn't a rational explanation.
- If there is, land.
- If there isn't, distract yourself. Get comfortable, try and take a photo, do your flying suit up, have a drink, look at your map. Find a fiddly task that needs a bit of concentration.
- Understand that in many situations fear is actually more dangerous than confidence. Then stop thinking that fate, your age, or the conditions are going to kill you if you dare relax for a second. Sit back, enjoy, and learn to trust your inner Eagle.



Martin and his team PHOTO: JO BINNS

NKI
DHV 1

HOOK
DHV 1-2

ARTIK
DHV 2
ARTIK XP
DHV 2 Race

PEAK
EN D

ICEPEAK XP
Competition

F-GRAVITY
Freestyle

N-GRAVITY
Acro

TAKOO
EN B Tandem

NOOKY
Speedster

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