



BIG CREEK, IDAHO



**Idaho High
Country Escape**



by John T. Kounis
photos by George A. Kounis

The cool morning air was calm as we flew past Greeley Mountain at 9,500 ft. and followed Logan Creek downstream. As my Cessna 185 descended into the narrow canyon, we kept a lookout for our destination, Big Creek Airstrip. Snow-capped peaks towered around us, yet the river below led a

safe path through the mountains. Soon the wide grass strip came into view, tucked into a long depression between two ridges off our left. I flew around the smaller ridge, making a tight pattern that conformed to the terrain. The airstrip disappeared briefly behind the ridge as I flew the downwind leg.

“There’s a wide spot in the canyon at the confluence of Smith Creek,” said my flight instructor, Lori MacNichol of McCall Mountain/Canyon Flying LLC. “It’s a good spot to turn around.” I pointed the nose toward the airstrip, a stretch of grass surrounded by forest. As we approached, trees passed by my right

wingtip. “There’s a dip at the beginning of the runway. I like to land past the dip, on the uphill part, for a smoother touchdown,” said Lori. Despite her advice, I flared a bit high, and bounced it in. The “arrival” was safe, albeit not particularly graceful. The runway slope slowed us down effectively and it took a little

power to coast up the grass runway to the top and park off the left side.

I shut down the engine across from an 80-year-old log cabin and surveyed our surroundings. We had arrived at a lush grass strip that services a remote outpost on the edge of the Frank Church River of No Return Wilderness. Forested ridges punctu-

ated by granite peaks dominated the horizon. After tying down, we walked a short distance up a path along a log fence that led to Big Creek Lodge, a collection of rustic log cabins on the edge of a meadow. The lodge is a great base for a pack trip into the surrounding wilderness, mountain biking, fishing, or simply stopping in for a meal.

Flying There

With a 3,550-ft. length, Big Creek Airstrip is long for an Idaho backcountry airstrip. Its relatively open approaches make it one of the easier strips in the area. In his book, *Fly Idaho!*, Galen Hanselman rates it a difficulty of 14 on his runway hazard index scale of 1–50. However, do not let this rating lull you into complacency. The elevation of 5,743 ft., sloping runway, and one-way-in/one-way-out topography do present challenges. All backcountry airstrips require adequate aircraft performance and precision flying. NTSB records reveal six accidents at Big Creek within the past eight years, resulting in four fatalities and three injuries. It's a good idea to receive instruction from a competent backcountry flight instructor before flying here on your own. One outfit that provides such instruction is McCall Mountain/Canyon Flying LLC based at McCall (MYL), 36 nm southwest of Big Creek (see sidebar).

You can approach from the west by flying past 9,233-ft. Greeley Mountain and then following Logan Creek downstream to the confluence of Big Creek, or from the east by flying along the Middle Fork of the Salmon River to Big Creek and then following it upstream. From the north or south, you'll need to cross



Previous page: Lori MacNichol and John Gregory on final. Above: Kasey Lindsay lands uphill past the dip in the rwy.

7,000–9,000-ft. ridges and then drop into the canyon formed by Big Creek. You won't see the airstrip until you're close, due to the twists of the river canyon and intervening terrain. Once you spot the strip, fly

over it first at a safe altitude to determine surface conditions and winds. An altitude of 6,500 ft. or higher should suffice as long as you stay directly over or east of the strip. Expect turbulence at the confluences of Logan Creek with Big Creek, south of the strip, and Smith Creek with Big Creek, north of the strip.

The strip runs north-south (Runway 1/19) in a depression between 350-ft. Hogback Ridge to the east and the canyon wall to the west. Since the runway slopes uphill to the south with a slight dip at the north end, pilots usually land to the south on Runway 19 and takeoff to the north on Runway 1, wind permitting. Fly a downwind leg northbound, east of Hogback Ridge. Don't fly in the middle of the canyon; rather, stay as close to the east wall as possible to allow you room to make a wide pattern. Depending on your altitude, you may lose sight of the strip on downwind, but it will come into view as you pass the north end of Hogback Ridge.

Most pilots begin their descent abeam the threshold, when the runway comes into view. If you turn final within a mile or so of the airstrip, you'll be able to keep it in sight throughout your approach. Watch out for turbulence as you reach the confluence of Smith Creek on

one-mile final. Downdrafts are common here mid-day. The strip is on a plateau up the west wall of the canyon, 200–300 ft. above the canyon bottom, so judge your altitude from the threshold, not from the ground below. As long as the threshold remains stationary in the windscreen, you're on a stable glidepath.

As Lori MacNichol advises, it's better to land on the uphill part of the runway, past the dip, so you're not trying to flare with the runway falling away from you. There's nearly 3,300 ft. of uphill-sloping runway past the dip, so you should have enough room to stop if your approach speed is under control. In late summer and fall, you may see sprinklers in use; if so, just land on the side of the 110-ft.-wide runway opposite the sprinklers. Keep an eye out for elk or deer that may wander unexpectedly into your path. There are chain tiedowns along the southeast side of the strip. Mid-week and in low season, you may have the only airplane on the runway, but activity picks up significantly on weekends. Aircraft also park along the west side of the strip when it's busy.

Takeoffs are normally on Runway 1. Once you lift off, veer right to follow Big Creek



Routes to Big Creek are upstream from the Middle Fork or downstream from the source of Big Creek or its tributaries. Other routes require crossing ridges into the canyon.

downstream. As Lori teaches, "Stay with the big water [primary drainage/wider canyons] and go downstream." The canyon descends gradually, losing about 2,000 ft. over the next 25 nm. Once you have sufficient altitude, you can turn on course.

Be cautious on takeoff if there are strong southerly winds (a tailwind). You can expect the tailwinds to increase as you climb, making it difficult to gain airspeed. The runway climbs slightly past the dip at the end, so you need some altitude to

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McCall Mountain/CANYON FLYING SEMINARS

Idaho offers a wealth of backcountry airstrips tucked into inaccessible corners of the wilderness. However, backcountry flying demands precision, adequate aircraft performance, and an understanding of mountain and canyon meteorology and techniques. Before you venture into the backcountry, we strongly recommend you receive instruction from a qualified mountain and canyon flying instructor.

Many of the backcountry flying techniques I use were taught to me by Lori MacNichol, owner of McCall Mountain Canyon Flying, LLC. Under her guidance, the company conducts seminars in the backcountry, landing at many popular Idaho strips. The four-day **Basic Seminar** includes the school's exclusive Mountain and Canyon Flight Training Manual, supplemental course materials, 15 hours of ground instruction, and six to nine hours of dual instruction. Since this is the most fundamental course, it is conducted out of McCall Airport, with instructors on board for flights into the backcountry. The Basic Seminar is a prerequisite to the advanced courses below. Daily continental breakfasts, afternoon refreshments, a Tuesday night welcome dinner, and a Friday final banquet are also included, 2007 course dates are: Jun 26, Jul 10, 17, & 24, \$2,195.



Returning students meet at a backcountry airstrip (usually with a wilderness lodge) for the five-day **Advanced Seminar**. The course covers more challenging airstrips, canyon flying techniques, and wilderness survival. Eight to twelve hours of dual instruction, lodging, and course materials are included, Jun 18–22, 2007, \$3,600 per participant, \$1,800 per guest. Another option for advanced students is the five-day **Middle Fork Lodge Excursion**, at the luxurious lodge on the Middle Fork of the Salmon River. Eight to twelve hours of dual instruction, course materials, nine hours of ground instruction, as well as all lodging, meals, and activities like horseback riding and fishing are included. This is a good course to take your family along, Jun 13–17, 2007, \$4,100 per participant, \$2,400 per guest.

Bush pilots who are itching to get started before the snow melts in the Idaho backcountry can take the **Utah Canyonlands Safari**. This four-day advanced seminar covers backcountry strips in Utah's rugged Red-Rock Country. Instead of forested mountains, you'll see impressive monuments, deep red canyons, and explore Native American heritage, Apr 25–29, 2007, \$4,600 per participant, \$2,500 per guest.

Backcountry flying is demanding on pilot and the aircraft alike, so pilots are required to have at least 250 hours of PIC time, 50 hours in make and model, and ten hours in make and model within the last 90 days before attending a seminar. Aircraft should have more than 200 horsepower, although exceptions can be made on a case-by-base basis. The school also rents a 180-hp Super Cub, \$185 per hour, and a 180-hp Cessna 172, \$132 per hour, for backcountry instruction.

If you've missed your opportunity this year, you can still receive private instruction for \$105 per hour (in flight) and \$45 per hour (ground), (208) 634-1344, www.mountaintocanyonflying.com.





safely fly over the trees and drop into the canyon along Big Creek. You can also expect turbulence at the confluence of Smith Creek, just off the end of the runway. If it's too windy to take off downwind, it's more prudent to stay on the ground rather than attempt an uphill take-off, which would require you to outclimb rising terrain and then contend with significant downdrafts and turbulence at the confluence of Logan Creek just upstream.

History

Like much of the Idaho backcountry, mining predominated in the region's history. Silver was discovered in the area in 1884, and by 1885, 150 miners had staked

about 100 claims here. Early mining wasn't profitable here, with an average yield of only about \$1-\$2 per ton, and it cost around \$8 per ton to pack the ore out on horseback to the railroad. Finally, in 1904, a mining claim by W.A. Edwards (on a ridge southwest of the present-day airport) was rich enough to warrant bringing in a stamp mill. Logan City was founded on the north bank of Logan Creek with a saloon, store, butcher shop, and a house. (It was later renamed Edwardsburg and stands about 3/4-mile south of the airport.) In 1911, the mill yielded \$1,200.

The original Big Creek ranger station was built of lodgepole pine logs in 1924-1925. Called the Commissary, it was a supply

depot for backcountry guard stations and fire lookouts. The building had a ranger's office, phone switchboard, food commissary, fire fighting equipment, sleeping quarters, and tack for horses and mules. You can see the building in a meadow just east of the tiedown area; it was added to the National Register of Historic Places in 1999.

In the 1920s, the only access to the area was via a wagon trail from Warren, across the South Fork of the Salmon River. The Civilian Conservation Corps built a road from Yellow Pine to Big Creek in 1933, providing easier vehicular access. The next year, what is now the Big Creek Lodge opened its doors, serving as a general store, gas station, and post office. One of the antique gas pumps with a glass jar to measure fuel is still visible in front of the northernmost building. A wooden cabinet along the east wall of the dining room has the original 40 post boxes from that era. The antique phone in the lobby still works. If you turn the crank, you'll ring neighbor Jack Walker about five miles down the road.

The lodge changed hands a few times over the years. On November 18, 1995, the owner of the lodge at the time perished in a Cessna 210 in bad weather just south of the airport, near Profile Pass. After the accident, a group of nine partners acquired the property and operated it until 2003, when they sold it to the current owners, Scott and Trudy Fodor, who are avid backcountry pilots and hay farmers in Michigan.

What to Do

After landing, get your bearings by walking a couple of hundred yards south along the path from the tiedown area. In a clearing surrounded by forest, you'll see a few log cabins with tin roofs next to a large pasture where pack animals may be grazing. Tall yellow letters spelling out "BIG CR" painted on one building's roof announce that you've arrived at the **Big Creek Lodge**. Wagon wheels, antlers, a couple of wooden skis, and antique farm implements decorate the exterior of the cabins. Inside the main lodge, old tools, shelves with antique bottles and cans, and an antique telephone adorn the walls. In addition to rooms and meals, the lodge has a general store with



Opposite: Tiedowns are at the south end. Above: Mountain bikers can ride 3 miles to this old cabin above Smith Creek Bridge.

snacks and limited camping and fishing supplies. If you must stay connected with the modern world in this pristine wilderness, you can use the satellite telephone for \$1.25 per minute or the satellite Internet connection for \$2.50 per half hour. If you want stay connected with each other while outdoors, two-way radio rentals are \$5 per day. The resident managers, Lorinne Munn and Allen Mulder are friendly and accommodating; they'll usually give guests a ride to trailheads or fishing spots if they're able.

There are popular **mountain bike** rides along the dirt road that runs past the property. It's less than a one-mile ride south to the historic mining town of Edwardsburg. In the other direction, a two-mile ride takes you down to the Smith Creek Bridge at the wilderness area boundary. Mountain bikes are not permitted in the wilderness, but you could turn upstream at the bridge and ride past abandoned mining camps. Don't expect much traffic; this dirt road is usually closed at Profile Pass due to snow from November through June, isolating this stretch around Big Creek. Even when the road is open, it's a three- to four-hour arduous trek from McCall, assuming there are no downed trees or washed out sections. A more challenging trail for both mountain bikers and hikers leads up to Hogback Ridge that parallels the east side of the run-

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The Big Creek Lodge has a few rustic log cabins just a short walk from the airstrip. It is a great base for pack trips into the wilderness, fishing, or making new friends around the campfire.



pick up the Big Creek Trail and hike downstream along Big Creek. At five miles, Copper Camp is a good place to camp for the night, or you can continue another five miles to Monumental Bridge, at the confluence of Monumental Creek, Cricket Creek, and Big Creek. In the other direction, you'll find the Lick Creek trailhead about two miles south of the

way. Take the road less than a half-mile south from the lodge and turn left at the old, overgrown access road before you reach the turnoff to Elk Summit. From there, a half-mile climb of about 350 vertical feet will take you to the top of the ridge with panoramic views of the airstrip and the valley. You can rent **mountain bikes** at the lodge for \$10 per day.

Sprawling over 2,366,757 acres, the Frank Church River of No Return Wilderness offers literally miles of **hiking** trails along pristine rivers, through pine forests, across meadows, and over ridges with stunning views. Sightings of deer, elk, and moose are common; there is even a pack of wolves in the area. Personnel at the USFS Ranger Station just west of the tiedown area can suggest hikes and advise on trail conditions. There is a detailed trail map on the wall, but no maps for sale there. You can, however, purchase topographic maps at the lodge, \$8.

Trailheads are on the road north and south of the airstrip. From the Smith Creek Bridge, two miles north of the airstrip, you can

airstrip. From there, it's a challenging three-mile, 2,000-ft. climb to Lick Lake at 7,750 ft. surrounded by granite ridges. You can continue three miles over an 8,316-ft. ridge and drop into Cougar Basin, a wide basin with several alpine lakes among pine forests and granite slopes.

If the wilderness trails sound appealing, but the 2,000-ft. climbs do not, Elk Springs Outfitters can arrange **pack trips** and elk hunting trips from Big Creek Lodge into the wilderness. Trips start at \$60 per person for a half day or \$100 per person for a

full day. The six-mile excursion to Cougar Basin takes about three hours, so it is best suited for a full day. To see more of the backcountry, overnight and longer excursions are available for \$200 per night, including a hot breakfast and dinner, and a sack lunch. One ambitious option is to make a 40-mile loop by connecting the Lick Creek Trail and the Big Creek Trail via Monumental Creek, (208) 761-1373, www.elkspringsoutfitters.net.

The airstrip is not right on the water, so it is a bit of a hike (or ride with the managers) to the nearest **fishing** spots. There's good fishing at Smith Creek to the north and on Logan Creek to the south; both permit catch-and-release fishing with no bait, and only barbless hooks. You can rent fly rods at the lodge for \$5 per day. Purchase a fishing license either in McCall or online, non-residents: \$11.50 for the first day and \$5 per additional day or \$82 per year, fishandgame.idaho.gov/cms/licenses.

Where to Stay

Big Creek Lodge offers amenities like electricity and three full daily meals that belie its isolation. A hydroelectric generator provides power for lights and low-power appliances (hairdryers won't work). Four rooms upstairs in the main lodge have one or two double beds. The rooms all share one common bathroom with a toilet and hot shower; rooms \$60-\$110. One cabin is a duplex; each unit has a double bed and a loft that can sleep two children, propane lights, and a bathroom (but no hot water). Guests can take a hot shower in the main lodge, units \$90. The best accommodations are in a cabin with a furnished living room, a wood-burning



In addition to rooms in the main lodge and a private cabin, Big Creek Lodge has two duplex units in a separate cabin with rustic Western décor. The units have solid wood furniture, gas lights, a bathroom, a double bed, and a loft.



stove for heat, a full kitchen with a propane refrigerator and stove, and a bathroom with hot water. It can sleep up to six in two bedrooms and on a sleeper sofa in the living room, \$175. The lodge is open from early May through the first week of November, (989) 382-7398 or (888) 848-0011, www.bigcreekidabo.com.

If you want to sleep near your airplane, the **USFS campground** at the airport has fire pits with barbecue grills and picnic tables set in the forest about 100 feet off the southeast corner of the airstrip, \$8 per night. There's an adjacent pit toilet, but if you want a hot shower, you'll have to head to the Big Creek Lodge, \$8 with your own towel or \$10 if you use their towel.

Where to Eat

Local pilots know they can land at the **Big Creek Lodge** for a good meal at any time. There's a good selection, since groceries are flown in weekly during Ray Arnold's Wednesday mail run. Fly-in breakfasts are most popular; they typically include pancakes, eggs, hash browns, sausage, fruit, juice, and coffee, \$10. Service starts at 7:30 a.m., so you can fly



Above: Mark Heiner veers right after takeoff in his Husky to follow Big Creek downstream. Below: The author enjoys breakfast with Lori MacNichol and John Gregory. The resident manager and cook, Lorinne Munn, used to cook at the Silver Dollar in Yellow Pine.

in, dine, and still take off before the mid-day winds and heat. Burgers, chips, salad, and a dessert such as cookies or a cinnamon roll, are typical lunch choices, \$10.

The lodge requests you inform them before 3 p.m. if you're going to have dinner, so they can anticipate the number of meals to prepare. If you arrive unexpectedly, you may have to settle for a meal that doesn't require hours of thawing. Dinner is served at 7 p.m. and includes a main dish like steak, pork chops, or turkey, served with pasta or potato, vegetables, salad, and dessert. Lemonade,

iced tea, or coffee is included, \$16. The lodge also serves beer, \$2-\$3.

Though there are challenges with landing on a sloping grass strip in the mountains, the effort is well worth it. Imagine kicking back in a chair on the deck of your log cabin. As the sun sets behind you, the sky turns shades of crimson and purple while horses graze in the meadow below. Later that night, you might hear wolves howling from a nearby ridge. After a filling breakfast, you'll spend the next morning riding in the backcountry, spotting elk and deer, fording streams on horseback, and casting your fishing line into alpine lakes. It's hard to imagine a better way to spend a weekend. Fortunately, all you had to do to get here is fly 20 minutes from McCall.

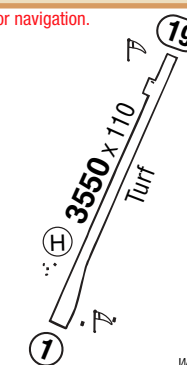
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Big Creek Airport

Big Creek, ID • N 45° 08.0' W 115° 19.3' • Elevation: 5,743 ft.



Not to be used for navigation.



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(800) FLY-FLY1
www.flightguide.com

Sectional Chart: Great Falls
Pattern Altitude: 6,543 ft.

FREQUENCIES

CTAF: 122.9
Salt Lake ARTCC: 128.05¹
Boise FSS: 122.35¹

¹Reception only possible at high altitudes

NOTES: Recommend land Rwy 19, take off rwy 1, when wind conditions allow.
CAUTION: Density altitude affects aircraft performance. Winds typically increase mid-day. Expect turbulence at confluences to the north & south.
RUNWAYS: 1/19 3,550 x 110 ft. Turf.
SERVICES: None.
PHONES: Idaho Division of Aeronautics (208) 334-8775, Big Creek Lodge (989) 382-7398 or (888) 848-0011.