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Pilot News

Weekend, Aug. 30-31, 2008



Volume 158 Issue No. 203 50¢

Cluster ballooning soars to Plymouth

▲ It's a
'chairway
to heaven'

BY JESSICA NUNEMAKER
SPECIAL TO THE PILOT
NEWS

PLYMOUTH — A man and his office chair. Sounds like the opening credits for yet another office themed Prime Time TV melodrama until you note the surprising addition of 36 towering blue and white helium balloons whose sole purpose is soaring into the sky.

On Sunday, that is precisely what cluster balloon enthusiast Jonathon Trappe intends to do.

The wee hours of the morning, that quiet time just before dawn, will find Riverside Intermediate School a veritable hive of frenetic energy swarming with a small army of volunteers who all share one common goal: get Jonathon Trappe up in the air.

It has been "tricky" organizing this cluster balloon launch around an estimated 500,000 visitors but this technical projects manager from Raleigh, N.C. is dedicated; as he says, "Flying is my passion."

His office chair apparatus will take to the skies as part of the 14th Annual Marshall



Jonathon Trappe, seated, will be going up, up and away Sunday from Riverside Intermediate School, in a rare cluster balloon attempt. In case of rain, Trappe will attempt the launch Monday. Launchtime is 7 a.m.

County Hot-Air Affair and should make for a show to remember.

In preparation for the Blueberry Festival take-off and potential record breaking climb to a staggering altitude

of 18,000 feet, Trappe required an FAA flight waiver to keep his flight legal. He was then urged to speak directly with the South Bend Air Traffic Control as well as the Chicago Centers Air

Route Traffic Control to ask for authorization to fly over their airspace.

It is easy to imagine that it took a bit of explaining as to what method of flight Trappe had in mind. He compares

36-helium cluster
balloon launch
to carry Jonathon
Trappe in chair
to higher than
10,000 feet

Sunday at 7 a.m.
at Riverside
Intermediate
School.

(Rain date is Monday)

the whole process to asking a police officer for permission to drive a car. With the necessary license, registration, and insurance, there shouldn't be an issue.

Rather than flying blindly into the sky and hoping for the best like the original "Lawn Chair Larry," the 1982 cluster balloon catastrophe in which Larry Walters quickly topped out at an unexpected 16,000 feet, surprising a couple of pilots, crashing into power lines, culminating in a \$1,500 fine, Trappe is completely committed to safety — both his own and others. He continuously strives to keep his flights well within legal parameters as defined by the FAA.

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PHOTO PROVIDED

Rochester, Minn. is the home of the first recorded cluster balloon flight back in 1937. Jean Piccard set off for the sky in a metal gondola held aloft by 92 four-foot hydrogen filled balloons, where he drifted through Iowa until gently landing with the aid of a knife and revolver.

Two decades would pass until Cluster Ballooning would be mentioned again, this time Hollywood style, with the premiere of the French film, "The Red Balloon." This landmark film is often considered the launch pad from where many cluster balloonists first caught that urge to explore the possibility of flight accompanied by a bevy of bright and shining balloons.

Cluster ballooning is a relatively new activity with just a handful of participants, many of whom take off on spur of the moment jaunts in everyday lawn chairs. It appears as though 2008 has been a stellar year for cluster balloonists and it's not over yet. This unusual sport has seen a sudden increase not only in the number of these fanciful launches but in the number of participants.

July brought lawn chair jockey Kent Couch, a gas station owner in Bend, Ore. to new heights as he took to the skies with a BB gun, boiled eggs, beef jerky, and chocolate for dessert. Cherry Kool-Aid filled jugs served a dual purpose, both as ballast and because "we wanted a little color."

While the foolhardy pilot did manage to land safely enough, it is definitely not a method recommended by serious cluster balloonists. Trappe has undertaken a few flights this summer yet his flights differ greatly from those of lawn chair pilots or, as Trappe calls them, "inexperienced aviation dreamers."

Trappe is quick to point out that the key difference between what he does and what these so called lawn chair pilots try to do, is that he is a licensed pilot and is prepared for whatever challenges nature throws his way. Recent completion of his latest flight training, this time in Europe, Trappe is now authorized to fly hydrogen gas balloons as well as free balloons. He has also taken sky diving lessons to prepare him for an emergency "ditching," or bail out.

Research and study are never ending for this cluster balloon enthusiast. He estimates that his ballooning hobby occupies at least 12 hours a week, with research, development, and designing flight diagrams, not to mention the extraneous training like his recent aerospace physiology course at Andrew's Air Force Base that delved into high altitude flight and the potential dangers, things that

"Have you seen movies where they take astronaut types, put them in a chamber, then try to get them to do simple things like play patty-cake? Well, that's what I was doing up at Andrew's in the chamber, trying to count backwards, and feeling pretty loopy."

— **Jonathan Trappe,**
cluster balloonist

could happen on his Cluster Ballooning free fly.

Training in an air pressure chamber that simulated an altitude of 25,000 gut wrenching, nausea inducing feet, he shares, "Have you seen movies where they take astronaut types, put them in a chamber, then try to get them to do simple things like play patty-cake? Well, that's what I was doing up at Andrew's in the chamber, trying to count backwards, and feeling pretty loopy." Prepared for the worst, yet hoping for the best, Jonathan Trappe is obviously well schooled and raring to go!

In an attempt to prevent daredevil copycats who lack proper training and skills from pursuing these potentially dangerous flights, he frequently urges education not only to perfect piloting skills, but also on how to share the sky with others.

For example, Trappe always carries along a transponder, a gadget that aircraft use to provide Air Traffic Control a accurate picture of where that flight is located in the sky. Receiving a "ping" off of his cluster balloon flight goes a long way in severely reducing the risk of an in flight collision. Nevertheless, he remains enthusiastic about the growth of the sport as long as it is done with safety in mind.

Ever the diligent student, Trappe managed to fit in a short trip to Europe to finish up the last two hours of flight time required to earn his new gas balloon rating. He has also reworked his office chair schematic to try and bring down the expenses per flight without sacrificing safety. His mathematical tinkering has resulted in a reduction to the final balloon count from a whopping fifty-five balloons down to a more manageable thirty-six.

But is still remains costly. Each balloon runs around \$55, not to mention the price of helium and the sheer volume it takes to fill each of these eight foot bobbling giants. Throw in the substantial start up costs of GPS, aircraft radio, variometer, altimeter, oxygen tank, crew radios, and emergency beacon locator, to name just a few, then add in the per flight expenditure on new ropes, oxygen fill, and transportation, it becomes almost impossible for Jonathan Trappe to continue his dreamy flights without the support of sponsors. This Sunday's dramatic sunrise launch hovers around a jaw dropping \$5000.

What does one bring on an office chair flight into the sky? Jonathan Trappe always includes a peanut butter and jelly sandwich and a parachute, "just in case." While there is not exactly room for carry-ons in this office chair turned impromptu aircraft, Mr. Trappe manages quite well. His numerous safety equipment and extensive list of related gear all conveniently clip into a carbineer keeping every item firmly attached, close at hand, and incapable of falling.

Soaring through the sky in his desk chair, leaving the stress of the lengthy and mentally draining preparations behind, Mr. Trappe basks in the moment while supportive girlfriend, Nidia, and friends, 55 world record holding balloonist Tony Bradley, aeronautical engineer Mark Caviezel and wife Joanna follow the floating adventurer below.

Trappe whiles away the hours taking photos and generally just enjoying the complete and total silence in what he considers the most pure form of flying. Imagine: no whirring of engines, no whistling of the wind, and no crying babies. It sounds utterly peaceful and like the ultimate getaway.

So why does he do it? Why spend the money, the time, and take the risk?

"My main goal and dream is to fly, to push myself to new heights, and to help the sport to grow in a safe way," Trappe said, optimistic that these breathless flights of fancy will serve as a source of inspiration. He simply enjoys the thrill of the flight and exploring the hushed world around him in what must surely be a humbling experience. His wish for those who witness his whimsical flight? "I hope they come away from a cluster flight with a renewed desire to dust off their dreams."

Join Trappe as he and his well traveled office chair touch the clouds and maybe, just maybe, feel a flicker of the old child-like awe and delight in what promises to be a truly uplifting experience.