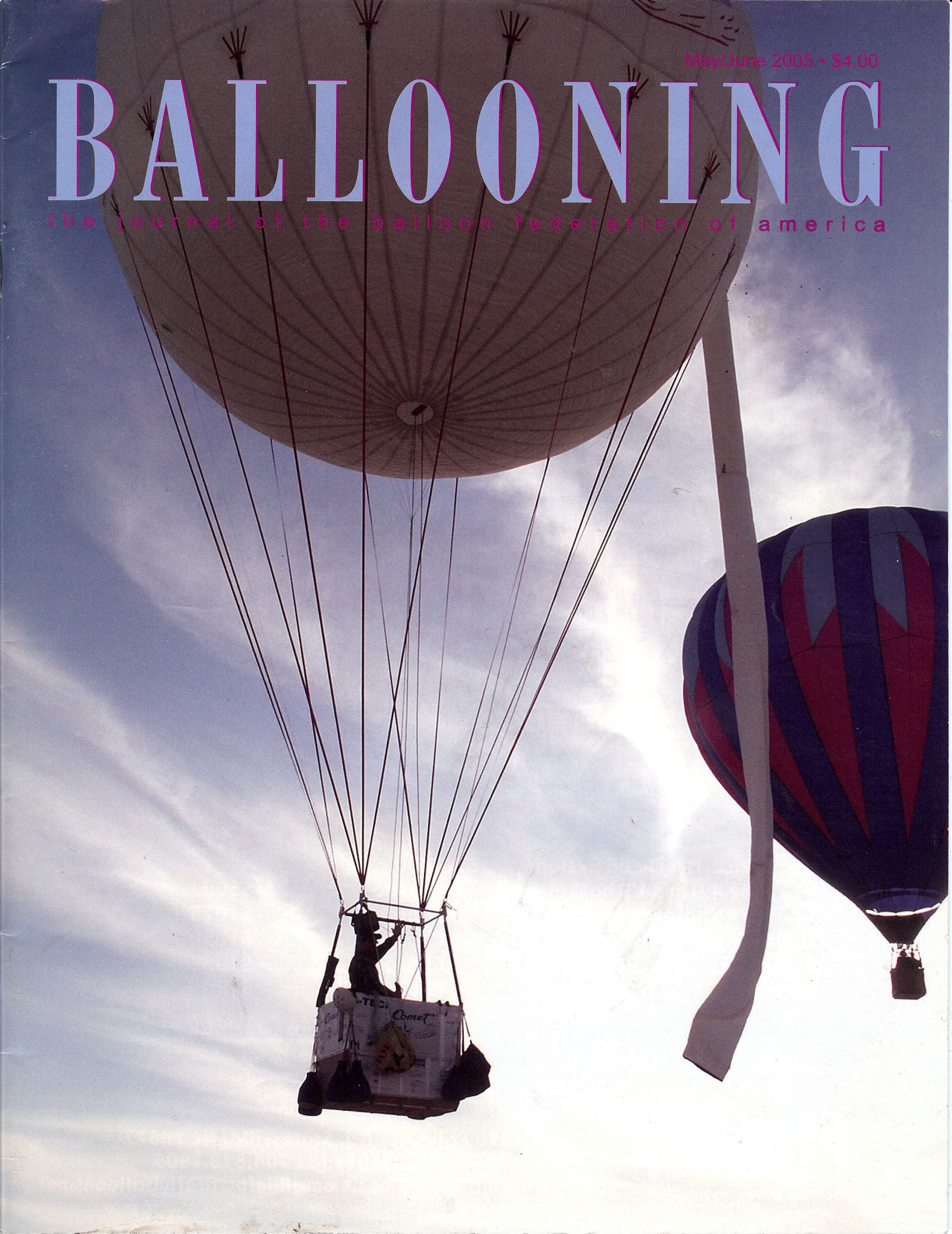


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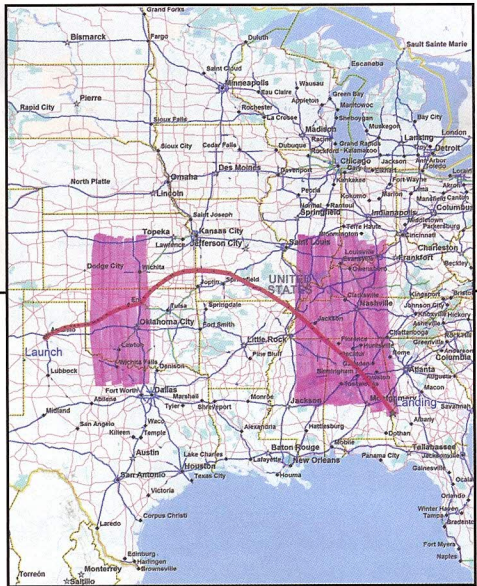
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Two Nights, One Balloon, 1,000 Gators

One Simple Record Setting Odyssey by Balloon

by Troy Bradley



Troy Bradley claimed the AA3 duration record with the same balloon used to break aviation's oldest standing record in 2002. Ironically both were held by Russian aeronauts. The map above reflects his track from launch in Texas to landing in Georgia. The pink shaded areas represent daylight hours.

Photo by Tami Bradley

My favorite season of the year is record season. Typically it falls sometime between October and February. Most households neither recognize nor observe this season. However in our house, record season is when, my wife, Tami, is overwhelmed with “real life” chores while I go through a daily regiment of comprehensive weather checks, phone calls, checklists, and attempting to coordinate schedules of crew members, observers, and helium availability. Without her support of carrying more than her fair share of the real life duties there is no way I could have succeeded as many times as I have.

In 2002, I broke the oldest standing aviation record by surpassing the AA-3 distance record set in 1922. The balloon was built specifically for that record, but it seemed a shame to leave it in the bag after she performed so beautifully. With the distance record captured, why not shoot for the duration record. The AA-3 duration record was set in March 1941, by a Russian named Serge Sinoveev. Serge's flight originated from Dolgoprudy, USSR, and lasted for 46 hours and 10 minutes. For years

Dolgoprudy's most famous resident was Alfred Nobel. The city is home to the Moscow Institute of Physics and Technology. Much like Los Alamos, New Mexico, Dolgoprudy is a scientific research and development community built by the government. One area of research was lighter than air applications that lead to several substantial record breaking flights. Any record that has stood for over 60 years definitely qualifies as substantial.

My sanction window opened October 15, 2004, five days after the Albuquerque International Balloon Fiesta. I assembled a crew, talked to Lou Billones about the meteorological parameters, and asked Ray Bair to man a command center. The command center is critical on long, fatiguing flights such as this. Having that extra set of eyes to look objectively at each situation making sure I make sound decisions is key. Ray serves in this position better than anyone I know.

I assured Tami this record wouldn't dominate my thoughts or disrupt our lives for long. The parameters for this record were simple! It required nothing more than launching into a strong high pressure system, drifting around for a couple of days,

and landing within a few hours' drive of the launch site. Tami laughed. Laughed! She had been through enough of these attempts to know "record" and "simple" shouldn't be used in the same sentence. Perhaps not even in the same paragraph. As usual, she turned out to be right. There were a couple of false starts. On one occasion, we even had the balloon laid out with the helium truck pulling on to the field as a new set of weather data was being analyzed. The high had shifted enough to push our trajectories into the Gulf of Mexico in less than two days. Lou was getting as frustrated as I and the rest of the crew. On three occasions the flight was cancelled within hours of launch. The 90 day sanction window came and went without a flight. I made a request for an extension of the sanction and removed simple from my vocabulary.

With a couple of days left in the extension, the weather patterns were looking perfect for a launch out of Amarillo, Texas. For the fourth time in four months Rick Hunt, Tami and I loaded the balloon and headed east. Weather wise I believed we would get off this time. Rick assured me we would fly, because he refused to drive back without a flight. The only issue I had to deal with was a helium supplier. Going to Amarillo, "The Helium Capital of the World", would make one believe a fill wouldn't be an issue. I made a lot of calls and received an incredible assortment of excuses as to why no one could fill a balloon. Fortunately, Mike Chandler of Valley Gas in Albuquerque saved the day sending a trailer of helium to Amarillo for the flight. (I'm sure the helium in that truck originally came from Amarillo.)

Under the supervision of Garry Haruska, we began filling around 1430 CST. Garry has run my inflations for years, since the time he figured out I have too many things to think about and have an affinity for twisting lines. Garry also served as the Controlling Observer for the flight. The inflation went

flawlessly. With little to no wind we were full in less than 40 minutes. I don't ever remember such a relaxed inflation. It was so smooth I began using the word simple again. (But this time I kept it to myself.)

The conditions were so incredible that local balloonist Don Weeks brought out his hot air balloon, so he could launch with me. Lift off was at 1626 CST, giving about two hours until sunset and the opportunity to land in the light if there were any problems. It was an unusual treat to have a hot air balloon flying next to me for the early part of the flight. The initial track was to the southwest and slowly turned clockwise for the first few hours, until after 6 hours I was within one mile of Tradewinds Airport where I launched.

The Texas panhandle is a pretty quiet area in the middle of the night. Once the Amarillo Control Tower closed at midnight, I had an extended conversation with a UPS pilot until he was out of my radio's range. He was the last person I spoke with that night other than almost constant communication with my chase crew. My chase crew consisted of Rick, Tami, and Rusty Elwell acting as the Assistant Observer. The speeds through the night were reasonably slow and the crew spotted me on several occasions.

By sunrise, I was less than 20 miles out of Texas near Cheyenne, Oklahoma. The day was relatively easy, cruising across the Oklahoma farmland. In the late afternoon I passed over Vance Air Force Base. This is an Alert Area for High Density Student Training, and they requested that I ascend to a slightly higher altitude to not affect any of their departures. If you ever want to attend a free air show, park outside of Vance. There was an amazing amount of activity and thankfully they were so helpful in letting me navigate through their airspace. The downside to flying such a small balloon is that I have a very limited amount of dispos-



While the helium flowed and launch preparations were underway for Bradley's latest record attempt, "real life" issues still had to be dealt with, like lunch for the Bradley's kids Savannah and Bobby.
Photos by Tami Bradley



Caught in turbulence at altitude, Bradley watched as high surface winds created waves on the lakes below him.
Photo by Troy Bradley

the balloon was still not responding properly, and I was going through ballast rapidly. Ballast at this point is defined as anything removable from the gondola. Religion is

able ballast, and that ascent cost a relatively high percentage of what was available. At sunset, I was around Ponca City, Oklahoma tracking NE at approximately 20 mph. I was slowly curving clockwise, passing north of Springfield, Missouri. Through the night my speed increased dramatically, topping out around 50 mph. At daybreak I was near Blytheville, Arkansas. The plan was to let the balloon superheat and head toward Birmingham, Alabama. It worked beautifully, as I went just east of the city a little after lunchtime. I continued to hold altitude and flew right past Auburn, Alabama.

Shortly thereafter, I began experiencing some turbulence and a noticeable drop in the temperature. The balloon that had been drifting along so peacefully for nearly two days came to life in the wake of this turbulence. The appendix began violently snapping from side to side as far as the tie-off line would allow, the load tapes were noticeably vibrating, and the variometer was having a heyday in the ascents and descents. I was advised by Lou and Ray to descend below 2,000 MSL to get out of the turbulence. Below me I could see several small lakes that would have a wave suddenly surge from shore to shore. I wasn't crazy about the descending idea, but I sure as heck wasn't happy where I was either. I decided to take what seemed to be the lesser of two evils and descend. Despite my descent

not my strong point, and I was really hoping God didn't take offense to my sudden choice to have some lengthy conversations with him.

With the excessive turbulence, gusty surface winds, and one bag of ballast remaining, I decided to set up an approach on a field that appeared to have access and no powerlines. Beyond that field was one more possible landing site and then trees as far as I could see. I opened the valve and began a very positive descent of about 800 fpm into the field. When I was sure there were no powerlines I deployed the trail rope and within ten feet of the ground I threw overboard the remaining bag of ballast. Upon striking the ground I opened the deflation panel, but due to the limited size of the field and gusty surface conditions I drug into a tree on the downwind side of the field. Other than an overdose of adrenaline, both the equipment and I came out unscathed.

At that point I wasn't sure where I was, but there were a lot of sounds not familiar to someone from Albuquerque. I'm sure my sleep deprivation amplified the sounds from the woods and water, but there were definitely a great number of creatures sharing this area with me. My chase crew was approximately 30 miles from my position when I landed, and closing in fast. The crew did a terrific job getting to the general landing area. However, accessing the actual landing site

proved difficult. They tried from every angle with no success. It turns out I was on the Georgia side of the Chattahoochee River, in the Bradley Unit of the Eufaula National Wildlife Refuge. I decided to walk out on the road to see if I could help lead the crew in. The crew now included Tarp and Desiree Head and Earl Miller. Nearing sunset, I saw and heard a wide array of animals on my walk out from wild pigs to wild turkeys. It was like walking through a zoo without the barriers. As the sun set and darkness set in, I kept hearing loud splashes and movement in the underbrush. All of a sudden I heard something scurrying towards me. As I spun around, I was thinking my heart doesn't need anymore excitement today. Shining the spotlight behind me I saw my pursuer was an armadillo. I am sure this was a normal sized armadillo, but to me it sounded like the mother of all armadillos. Turns out I shouldn't have been worried about killer armadillos, but the thousand plus alligators that call the

Refuge their home. When I arrived at a little ranger station by the entrance there was a big sign with the Refuge rules, including "Daylight Access Only." I think the animals know this and anything is fair game at night, even balloon pilots.

Eventually, the crew and I hooked up at the Refuge entrance. Anyone who has ever attended a tailgate party with Desiree knows she is always prepared. We all enjoyed the champagne, beer, cheese and crackers she brought while we waited for the Refuge Manager, Frank Dukes, to arrive and unlock the gate. Frank escorted us back to the balloon and we had it packed up in very short order.

Thankfully, I stayed aloft for 46 hours and 51 minutes for a new world record, didn't damage anything, and wasn't eaten by anything higher in the food chain. See honey, I told you it would be simple.



Simple right? A landing in the trees and a night time recovery, but it was all smiles in the end and another world record for Bradley.