



SOUTHWINGS

Conservation through Aviation

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Gaining altitude - and perspective with **SouthWings**

BY RONALD WAYNE

THE FIGHT TO PRESERVE AMERICA'S FORESTS HAS RECEIVED CONSIDERABLE HELP FROM ABOVE—from flying services that let researchers, reporters and policy-makers see for themselves what's really happening on the ground. One of those services most widely used is SouthWings, based in Chattanooga with an office opening this fall in Asheville, North Carolina. SouthWings is, in fact, the preeminent nonprofit environmental aviation service in the Southeastern United States, where the timber industry has intensified its activity in recent years and conservationists have been forced to do likewise.

Among the passengers have been four members of Congress plus several times that number in state legislators. There have also been scientists from universities, research institutes and government agencies and journalists from the *Wall Street Journal*, *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, *Audubon* magazine, CNN, "The Lehrer News Hour," National Public Radio and a host of regional publications and broadcast outlets.

"We have a very simple premise—to take people up in the air to look at the forests," said Steve O'Neil, SouthWings' executive director. "When they're up in the air, people see the problem without a lot of explanation being needed. And we run the gamut—the average Joe out of a dirt strip to people from a major foundation. We fly anyone and everyone."

"It's an information-awareness service, actually. The aerial view gives perspective you just can't get by driving around or through an area," said Dr. Jonathan Evans of the University of the South,



PHOTOGRAPH BY LOUIS SOHN

who used SouthWings several times in his two years of studying 18-year forestation patterns in a seven-county region of the Cumberland Plateau in Tennessee. "I learned about their service about the time we were getting started on the project, and seeing the area from the air stimulated my thinking as to what sort of questions I would pursue and what hypotheses I would test. They have since helped us on follow-up projects, such as data-checks and confirming land-use changes we had figured on the computer."

Seeing really is believing much of the time, and it's also cheap for the people who use SouthWings. Founded in December 1996 by Hume Davenport, it provides flights at no charge to the passengers. Some give donations to help pay for gasoline, but the program's basic

support comes from philanthropic foundations.

Davenport, 40, is from a family well known for philanthropic and conservation interests—in addition to making the Krystal hamburger famous throughout the South—and he has paid his own dues in environmental work. A volunteer pilot for a time with the LightHawk flight service in the West, a model of sorts for SouthWings, he also worked for a time in Honduras and later directed a conservation effort called the Northern Rocky Mountains project. In SouthWings he admits to a primary mission of "stopping the proliferation of chip mills," but forest issues are not his company's only focus. It has worked with more than 200 organizations and provided flights from West Virginia to the Tampa Bay area of Florida and from the Atlantic coast to Arkansas. The service

has been used in monitoring coastal habitats and mountaintop removal mining, and for tracking pollution and wildlife progression. SouthWings even has transported red wolves cross-country to help in the mating process of the threatened species: Davenport flew to Minnesota in June to bring one back to the Tennessee Wildlife Center.

Besides Davenport, the president and director of flight operations, the service regularly uses five volunteer pilots—out of the areas of Knoxville; Bristol, Virginia; Tallahassee, Florida; Atlanta, and Charlotte. Susan Lapis in Bristol specializes somewhat in carrying observers over the mountaintop coal mines in West Virginia.

"She flies a lot for us, probably a couple of times a week. Some of the others fly maybe a couple of times a month for us," O'Neil said. "We

SOUTHWINGS EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR STEVE O'NEIL AND PILOT LARRY PETERSON AT JASPER, TENNESSEE AIRPORT



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SPRING 2001—CLEARCUTTING CONTINUES ON THE CUMBERLAND PLATEAU.

call for one of our volunteer pilots when Hume is already scheduled or when it's more economically feasible than him taking a particular flight. They truly are volunteers. We help them out by sharing their gas costs and other expenses, but we don't pay them anything for their time. We are not a commercial operation."

O'Neil, 37, was hired in mid-2000, after Davenport moved the headquarters to Chattanooga from the airport in nearby Jasper, Tennessee, where he began his flight service almost four years earlier. That airport remains home to SouthWings' Cessna 180. Another plane donated for the company's use is going with Davenport to Asheville.

O'Neil also used to fly for LightHawk. A native of New York City, he spent much of his growing-up summers on property his family owned in southern Georgia, and he has worked in environmental organizations for more than a decade. One of those was Earth Watch. Another was Ocean Arks, which brought him to Chattanooga in 1993. That company's purpose was to develop methods to clean sludge sediments out of Chattanooga Creek.

O'Neil worked on that project for over four years, and then he went to Dublin, Ireland, and earned a master's degree in environmental science from Trinity College. He had married a native Chattanoogan and they have three children, so he was delighted to accept Davenport's job offer upon the completion of his degree.

"Forest conservation has always been an issue very close to my heart, and the forests in eastern Tennessee and western North Carolina are just magnificent," O'Neil said. "This region is one of the most biologically rich in the world. There are more freshwater aquatic species here than anywhere else in North America, and so many biomes, from highlands to wetlands. But some of those are very fragile."

The expansion to Asheville is mainly because so many conservation groups have located there, O'Neil explained, and many of SouthWings' guests already are coming from the western North Carolina city. He and Davenport do think their service has made a difference, although they see no sign of being unneeded in the near future.

"We are seeing progress, I think," O'Neil said. "For instance, there are two separate bits of legislation before the Tennessee legislature that are due to be voted on next year."

"And they are very viable pieces of legislation. They stand a good chance of being passed, unlike previous pieces," Davenport added. "A lot of different groups have taken our flights now, and we collaborate with a lot of other organizations. I think a lot of people do care. Many just don't realize the extent of the problem until they see it."

Out of sight certainly can mean out of mind, and the SouthWings pilots take pride in preventing that.

"No one leaves a flight unaffected, but there's one flight I know I will never forget," Davenport said. "I was flying a group of citizens and journalists over mountaintop removal mine sites in West Virginia about three years ago, and they were seeing the effects of the explosions used on those mountains—as much as 800 feet taken off the tops. Really, that is the environmental tragedy of the U.S. right now. But that morning, everyone on that plane wept, including the journalists."

"We do like people to be affected, but we don't want it to be just a passionate experience. We like to do science-based research, and we like to make sure our flight work is balanced. We show places where land is preserved, for instance, as well as the clear cuts."

And they let the viewing spark the reviewing, of opinions or strategies or policies. 