

Redstone in its autumn glory.

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The small white aircraft spins its four propellers, rises straight up, then hovers about 12 feet off the ground, watching the three spectators as we wave to its camera. Then it flies off, deftly piloted by photographer Lewis Cooper. We see its bird's eye view of tree tops and cliffs through Cooper's smartphone.

Cooper uses his Phantom 4 drone to take some jaw-dropping local shots. "You really used to have to be a good pilot to fly these," he says. "The first ones out crashed with regularity. You had to practice and practice because you had to be a pilot just to take any photos."

"They finally got it together with the Phantom 3," he continues. "This Phantom 4 is really stable. It can fly for about half an hour and take video or stills. You can program it to follow a flight path and tell it to come home again."

Usually. This drone's predecessor had been programmed to fly up to Three Sisters Falls, 1,300 feet up and about 3,000 feet away from its takeoff. "It was supposed to come home, but it lost its signal. That one's still up there. Somewhere," he says. Several people searched, but living up to its name, the Phantom completely disappeared.

PHOTOGRAPHER LEWIS COOPER'S DRONE CAPTURES AN

EAGLE'S EYE VIEW

ARTICLE NICOLETTE TOUSSAINT PHOTOGRAPHY LEWIS COOPER



Lewis Cooper shows the correct way to land a drone - with a mid-air catch. Photo by Nicolette Toussaint.

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“So this is your second drone?”

Renee Ramage, Lewis’ life partner, chuckles. “Nope, not even close. This is probably about number five.”

“I crashed quite a few learning to fly them,” Lewis grins ruefully. “I would be calculating the cost in my head as they went down.” Crashes usually destroyed the \$500 gimbal that keeps the drone’s camera horizontal. “I would make repairs, but they would never fly right after a crash,” he says. “Then I kept selling them to get the newer model...”

Cooper, a software engineer, took up photography in his teens. “I took lots of bad camera shots with bad 110 cameras,” he scoffs. He couldn’t afford a good camera until his dad—who ran a small museum—made him an offer. Dad would front half the cost of a \$800 Nikon D50 camera if Lewis would document all the antiques in the Myton Memories Museum.

Cooper became interested in buying a drone after seeing a magazine ad. He showed it to Renee, also a talented photographer. “I mentioned it once, then dropped the subject.” Good quality drones sell anywhere from \$1,500 to \$3,000.

At Christmas, when Lewis opened his gift from Renee, he was expecting a cheaper RadioShack drone that Renee had located. But no! The package contained the real McCoy, his first Phantom.

“What I love about drone photography is that you can see what you could never see from the ground,” Cooper enthuses. “Drones have become so stable now, it’s like having a really high tripod.” Among his favorite drone shots: an image taken from high above Hayes Creek Falls, rock art laid out on the banks of the Crystal River, and the iconic Crystal Mill above Marble—all seen from an angle previously reserved for eagles.

By programming a regular flight path, Cooper has been able to document the building of the True Nature Healing Arts reflexology path and of a kiva that is now being built near it. Several Aspen realtors have also commissioned him to make aerial videos of properties they have for sale.

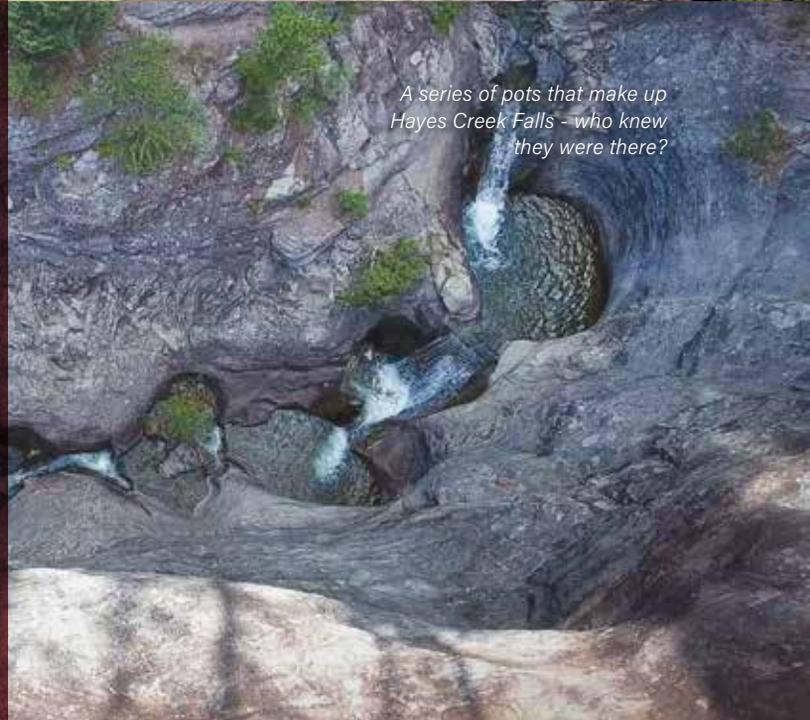
Cooper is scrupulous about obeying FAA rules and respecting the privacy of people on the ground, for whom drones can seem like the creepy “eye in sky” described in the Alan Parson’s Project 1982 song. As Cooper says, “Drones are really going to mess up this world if we don’t handle them properly. I made a guy in Carbondale mad by flying over his house while filming the Kiva project.” After being confronted by the disgruntled homeowner, Cooper spent half an hour apologizing and explaining his “deep respect” for privacy. “Now my number one goal is not to disturb anyone. When I filmed at the Crystal Mill, I waited until absolutely *everyone* was gone.”

Cooper, who lived for years in a 560-square-foot, off-the-grid cabin north of Vernal, Utah, has a love of wild country. “You can fly off a cliff or hover over a waterfall. The drone can see places you can’t get to at all. How exciting it is to think that you’re probably looking at something nobody but birds and bats have seen before.”

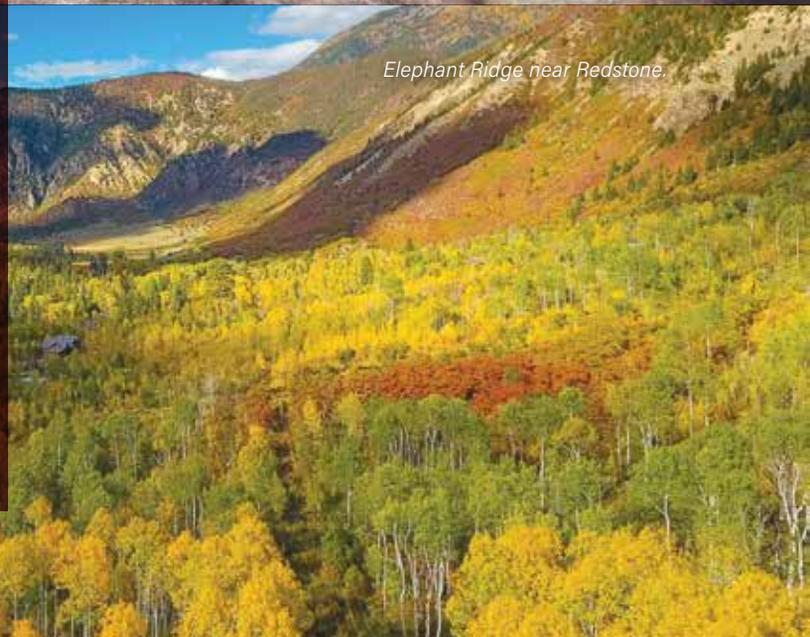
To view Lewis Cooper’s photography, visit GonzoShots.com.



An eagle's eye view of the Crystal Mill above Marble.



A series of pots that make up Hayes Creek Falls - who knew they were there?



Elephant Ridge near Redstone.

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