

# Flying the Star Valley



By Garrett Fisher  
Images by Garrett Fisher

Most of my literary pursuits are something of a combination of a battle cry, aviation, and a dose of creativity. Charging into the skies with my underpowered and uncomfortable aircraft, I set off for some destination that looks great sitting in my comfortable office. Then, on the way to said dangerous and silly destination, I notice something pretty on the way, fly over there instead, and when I use up my fuel, I have to change the entire plan and I forget the first thing I went after.

The Star Valley is the epicenter of this kind of "planning," culminating in my ninth book, *Flying the Star Valley*.

Being based in Alpine lends to a certain mathematical reality: that almost all of my flights start and end in the Star Valley, including the ones where I stay on task and head far off. That results in a situation where I have thousands upon thousands of unplanned photographs of this section of the state, a product happenstance flying over time.

The Star Valley is unquestionably beautiful. It may be one of the most fertile inhabited valleys (at least by appearance) in Wyoming, due to lower altitude and

higher moisture content. Situated with mountains on both sides, it's an island of artistic beauty, surrounded eventually by arid regions on three sides, and much higher terrain heading into Yellowstone.

Many times, I set off to explore something in the general vicinity of Alpine, heading west off into Idaho, or further south out of the valley. Most times, I end up wandering up and down the Salt River Range, heading down the valley over farms and rolling fields and back up over the summits, cruising at 10,000 feet. Sometimes I reverse the order, in both cases opting to remain closer to home than to head off into other areas. It is simply more beautiful here than some of the lower and dryer sections found both in neighboring Idaho and more desolate expanses of Wyoming.

The thought crossed my mind to put a book together of the photographs I was accumulating, specifically while flying over Thayne, Wyoming. I distinctly remember the dialog I had with myself: "Seriously? There are what, 8,000 people in the entire county? Do you think anyone will actually *buy* one of them? Ok, fine, forget it then." Some time later, here we are, and the book is done, despite my intentions to the contrary. Some of my best work has come from being close to home.





There is something to be said with living right next to the airplane. From the moment I decide to hop in the plane and go chase something in the air to actually being a few hundred feet above the ground is usually a fifteen-minute lapse in time. That is made possible because there is no drive involved. Having lived in many places all over the country where I had to drive to the airport, flying became about good weather. It was simply a waste of time to think I could capture a rainbow, fly in the rain, above a fog layer, in the snow, or in any of a number of combinations that I found possible in Alpine, because it would be gone by the time I got in the air, or in my rabid pursuit of menacing weather, I'd end up killing myself.

Alpine is at the convergence of three mountain ranges (Snake, Caribou, and Salt River) and three river systems (Snake, Greys, and Salt). Unlike the rest of Wyoming, this part of the state is on the wet side of the Salt River and Wyoming Ranges, affording a collision with incoming weather systems from the Pacific. As moisture crosses the Snake River Plain of Idaho and ascends the Caribou Highlands, things start to get active.



I often liken the weather to a combination between the Great Lakes of upstate New York, where I grew up, and Summit County, Colorado where I lived for a while. A fusion of moist, active, changing, vibrant, and yet distinctly *Western* weather. I knew little of what to expect until I arrived. All I knew was that temperatures were a little warmer than Colorado, snowfall was about the same as New York, and rainfall was the same as Breckenridge, Colorado, averaging in the low 20s of inches per year. I expected things to be dry, and they really were not.

When weather collides with mountains, it does very interesting things. Clouds form in odd places, creating textures that flow over and around terrain, producing a visual juxtaposition where it is evident that sky and

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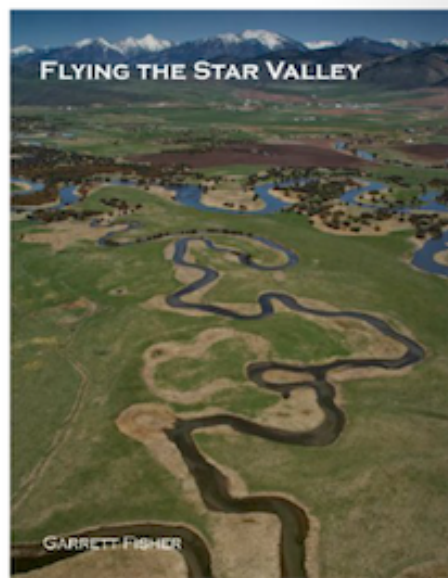




earth are interacting with each other, producing an unpredictable variety of outcomes.

I found myself flying in circumstances that I would consider downright crazy elsewhere. Finding a random mountain in the West with clouds swirling around it is usually a signal to head *away* and not closer. Being that I was in visual range to my home field, it made it possible to get very close to weather features in ways I had not done before. Generally after some weather blew through (or during it), clouds would form on the lee side of ridgelines, or banked against the east side of

the Star Valley against the Salt River Range. Over and over I would take off in these conditions, holding a careful eye to the west to see if any new weather was coming in. More than once I was rewarded with an interaction of clouds that was nothing short of mesmerizing, a sort of spiritual transcendence, wedged between clouds and mountains, all moving gracefully, powerfully, and slowly. For those of you that think I am completely deranged, it was the fact that Alpine was so close that made all of this possible. If my personal fear occurred: the engine quit, or the weather went south, all I had to do was turn around, and I could glide back to safety.



As with all of my books, I am trying to bring something to readers that cannot be experienced easily. The totality of the Star Valley is not restricted to the valley itself, it is comprised of the mountains that surround it and the rivers that flow through it, channeling weather and moisture in ways that make life on the ground the way that it is. Due to a lack of roads in national forests, it would require many intense mountain climbing events to gather perspective available from the airplane. That, and who knew that cows make amazing patterns in the snow when viewed from above? WLM

*Flying the Star Valley* is available at Dog Eared Books & Eagle Flight Services in Afton, on Amazon.com, and from the author's website at [www.garrettfisher.me](http://www.garrettfisher.me) for \$17.

*Garrett Fisher is the author of nine books, six of which relate to aerial photography. He is in the process of publishing a long list of aerial photography books focused on the Rockies as seen from his antique airplane. Garrett blogs regularly about his aviation adventures at [www.garrettfisher.me](http://www.garrettfisher.me).*

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