

Eagle Attack

Soaring at 8,000 feet, paraglider Nicky Moss was ready for anything. Except this.

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Surge of Adrenaline

A thousand feet above a rocky red plain stretching to a distant ridge of eucalyptus trees, a woman stood on the crest of a hill. She took a deep breath, then three running steps, and launched herself into space.

Nicky Moss felt a surge of adrenaline as she was lifted by an updraft of air. Clad in a black Gore-Tex flying suit, her dark hair in a long braid to minimize wind resistance, she hung on delicate nylon lines 20 feet below the rainbow arc of her paraglider. She had become a bird.

Moss was competing in the trials for the 2007 Killarney Paragliding Classic at a spectacular site 100 miles southwest of Brisbane, Australia. Professionals from all over the world had come to compete to see who would be top gun.

Only five-foot-five, Moss, a British champion, was trim and toned, and possessed the strength and discipline of an accomplished yoga teacher.

The night before, she had carefully gone through her safety routines, making sure her flight instruments, including a pair of Global Positioning System (GPS) units, were working. She packed her flying suit, helmet, gloves, goggles and walking boots.

It was 1 p.m. by the time Moss launched. There were about 30 other gliders already in the air around her, circling like colorful butterflies.

Paragliding competitions are similar to yachting events in that participants are assigned tasks and have to go around certain markers, such as a church in a village 30 miles away. The task might be to fly within 1,200 feet of the steeple, then head off to a second point. Each maneuver is recorded by pilots' GPS units for scoring by the competition's judges. Today's first task was a 20-mile flight from Killarney in Queensland to a town called Woodenbong in Australia's Northern Tablelands.

At launch, paraglider pilots search for thermals—rising air currents generated by the heating of the earth. These are what enable gliders to climb. Pilots watch for large soaring birds because they, too, ride thermals. If you spot an eagle, conditions might be just right for flying.

The weather at the launch site that afternoon was wonderful. Fluffy cauliflower-shaped clouds hung in the bright blue sky, and a gentle breeze flowed over Moss. The fiery yellow canopy of her glider glowed gold in the sunlight. The canopy, or wing, was made of 77 separate cells for safety and stability. With an arching span of 38 feet, it now carried Moss over a range of red rock mountains and plunging waterfalls.

A Loud, Raucous Cry

Paragliding is not all scenic beauty and tranquillity, however. There are broken bones and fatalities. A Chinese paraglider training for the 2007 World Championship was sucked into a thunder cell and killed by a bolt of lightning. Moss herself had had her share of bruises. A year earlier, her canopy malfunctioned in strong winds, and she landed hanging upside down in an Australian gum tree.

Now she found a strong thermal and rode it, spiraling upward in a helix to 6,000 feet. The 77 cells in her canopy puffed with air, and her vario altimeter sounded off. A vario beeps rapidly in a rising pitch, what Moss calls a happy sound, when the wing is full and the glider is soaring up. It puts out a "sad" declining pitch when the glider is going down.

There are times in a strong thermal when, Moss says, it feels like the hand of God is yanking her upward. It gives her a head rush and sets her heart thumping. Moments like this remind her why she first got into paragliding.

She had always been an outdoors kind of girl, having grown up on an English farm and spent her time horseback riding and rock climbing. But it was a trip to the Alps, when she watched a paraglider soaring among the peaks, that inspired her to take up the sport.

Now, at 39, she'd become a full-time professional paraglider and earned her living through sponsorship, promotion and motivational speaking.

The sun was high, coming straight down over Moss's shoulder. She could see her shadow rippling on the rocks below—not a good sign. She knew she was flying too low and began to search for a stronger thermal.

At about 8,000 feet, she heard the first screech—the loud, raucous cry of a wedge-tailed eagle. These raptors have been described as tigers of the air because they dominate their territory. They are Australia's largest predatory birds, with wingspans of six feet. The bigger females can weigh as much as 12 pounds. Wedge-tails prey on other birds, reptiles and mammals such as rabbits. With razor-sharp talons, they can dive with enough force to kill young kangaroos.

Paragliders encounter any number of weather-related problems. But Moss had never experienced anything like this. She was worried because the eagle was making such a ruckus. The red-brown bird's screech was bloodcurdling. She glanced around, wondering where it was. Suddenly she felt a hard thump behind her. Frightened, she glanced up and saw the top surface of the glider deform. The eagle had knocked the air out of some of the biggest cells in the canopy.

Moss now saw the eagle in front of her, about 30 feet away. It gave another deafening screech and veered off to the right, up and behind her, out of sight. Then, to her left, Moss spotted a second bird, its cry more threatening than its mate's. The pair of eagles began circling her in a coordinated attack. First, one peeled off and swooped at her from behind, then the other one came in from a different angle.

Terrifying Attack

On each sortie, the eagles tucked their wings tight and plunged like spears at Moss's canopy. It was terrifying. Every few seconds, one of the birds struck the glider. The first thing she did was switch off the vario, thinking its beeping might be disturbing the birds. Turning it off, however, meant that she wouldn't be able to determine how quickly she was descending, but she had to take the chance.

At the next attack, Moss screamed back at the screeching eagle, hoping to frighten it off. She couldn't. She'd try another gambit, a "big ears" maneuver—tugging on the lines to pull the tips of the wing down. When released, they'd make a loud crack. She waited for the next approach, yanked the lines in tight and, as the bird swooped—*whack!*—snapped the wing like a whip. It might as well have been a whisper for all the effect it had.

Moss's hands were shaking now. She'd have to go to the limit and risk collapsing her canopy. She'd pull the wing in, to half its normal size, in order to snap it out with a really explosive sound. But if she pulled in just a little too much, it could send her into a fatal downward spiral.

She strained until the lines cut into her hands. The canopy came together like a thumb and forefinger pinching. Then as the eagles swept in—*bam!* It didn't work. The birds kept attacking. Moss could see their talons fully exposed, each as long as a paring knife.

Moss then felt the glider go "mushy." The eagles had damaged the structure. Rips in the top made the glider harder to control. It was thrashing wildly. Time was running out. She pulled on one of the two brake lines and leaned in, putting the glider into a corkscrew descent.

As Moss whirled downward, the eagles continued to dive at her. She tried another maneuver called a wing-over, swinging the glider side to side like a pendulum, trying to make herself a harder target to hit. But then one of the birds slammed into the back of her head, bounced off her helmet and became tangled in the glider's lines. It was caught on its back, some five feet above her with its huge talons raking the air, screeching like a demon.

Going Down Fast

The canopy began to collapse. The bird's weight and frenzy were causing the leading edge of the wing to fold inward. It lost lift. Moss started going down fast. She glimpsed the ground coming at her in a blur of green, brown and red. Already she had dropped more than 6,000 feet. She had only 1,500 feet left before she'd hit the ground.

Suddenly, miraculously, the trapped eagle managed to free itself and flew off. Now Moss had to stop spiraling. With only seconds to act, she applied the brakes, sorted out the tangled lines and shifted her weight. Fortunately, below her was a field without trees or rocks.

But moments later, the eagles were back. They kept after her until she was down to 300 feet. Finally, encountering an updraft, the birds soared off. Moss then hit a headwind and slowed down, gliding to a gentle landing.

Inside her suit, she was drenched in cold sweat. Her first thought was to check the glider. It was practically new, specially made for the upcoming championships. Now it had a gaping hole in one of

the front cells and five-foot rips in the seams.

A carload of other paragliders who had landed up ahead came running toward her. When Moss saw them, she collapsed.

But it didn't take her long to recover her composure. The very next day, she was back in the air, determined to do her best in the competition. She'd flown with big birds before in the Himalayas—never had she been hunted by them. The image of flying like an eagle was at the core of her love of paragliding. After all, Moss says, "it's the closest you can actually get to being a bird."

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