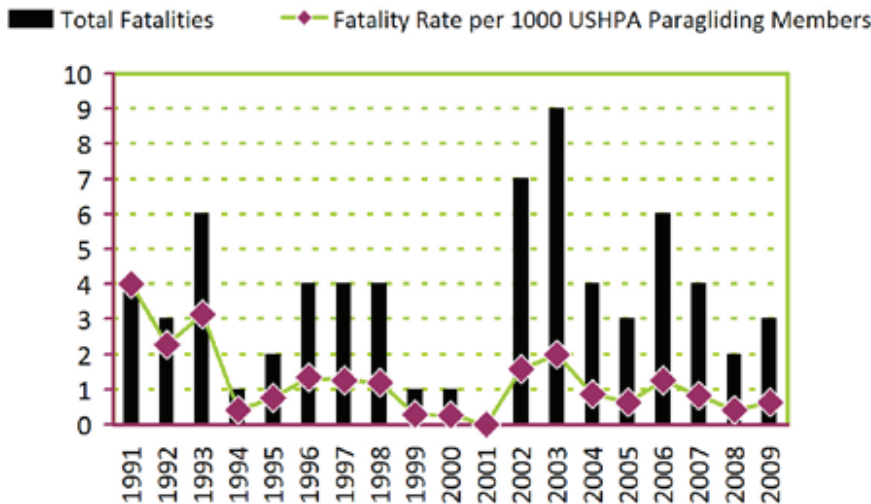


US Paragliding Fatalities



2009 PARAGLIDING SUMMARY ▶ For me, it is like doing taxes. With an April deadline looming, I sit down with a stack of accident reports from the past year and start reading. Six or eight reports at a sitting are about all the grim stories I can stand. After each session, a theme tends to emerge:

Radios are bad—there are so many ways radio-controlled instruction can go wrong.

Radios are good—for relaying small bits of time-critical information.

Women had a really tough year.

People are throwing their reserve parachutes too late.

One evening devolved into “Darwin awards” night. It’s tempting to take some cheap shots. After all, we know better than the “bought-it-online-and-teaching-myself” types, right? They tend to re-discover old lessons (top-landing in strong and turbulent conditions) with predictable and painful results (don’t ask). And would anyone really use a long rope to attach his gear to his truck, then when the wing started to thrash around in the strong wind, grab onto the harness to bring it under control? The newspaper says he dangled from the harness more than 50-feet-up until he couldn’t hold on any longer.

But legitimate students do dumb stuff all the time, and it only looks dumb in hindsight. Even experienced pros encounter new situations and unflyable air from

time to time. So try not to discount the misfortunes of others. Take the lessons seriously and you or a friend may benefit someday.

I finally quit procrastinating and plowed through all the reports, then collected some summary statistics. So here they are: the big picture(s).

The rules are the same as always: US locations only (though visiting pilots are included), flight-related or ground-handling only (not retrieval), and only the 40 injured reports are included in the numbers, not the 6 non-injury reports which are only mentioned in discussion.

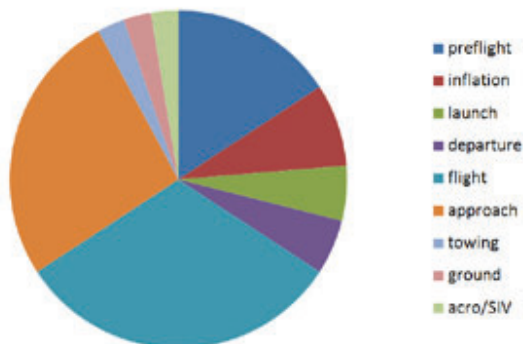
Three pilots landed in the ocean, and all three became hopelessly entangled in their lines and wing. Two were rescued before they drowned; one was not. Not good odds, folks! By contrast, several pilots landed in trees, some avoiding the certain injury of impacting the ground, some walking away without a scratch, one with a scrape on the arm. So if the options are a tree or the ocean, which should you choose?

Another fatality resulted when the pilot launched on a day most considered too strong and cross for flying—a very brief flight, big collapse, too low to throw. The third was flying in thermals, got into a cascade of events, some likely pilot-induced, and threw the reserve parachute too late.

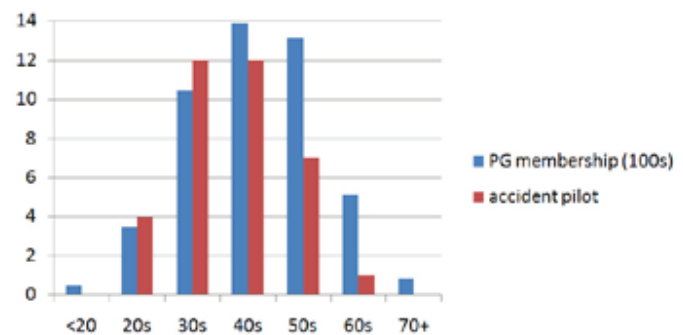
There was one acro-gone-bad crash this year. Again, the reserve was thrown but not quite soon enough to avoid extremely serious injury. Another reserve opened with the pilot about 10 feet above the ground—not fast enough to avoid a trip to the emergency room, but soon enough to avoid “something far worse” according to a witness.

One towing injury occurred when the

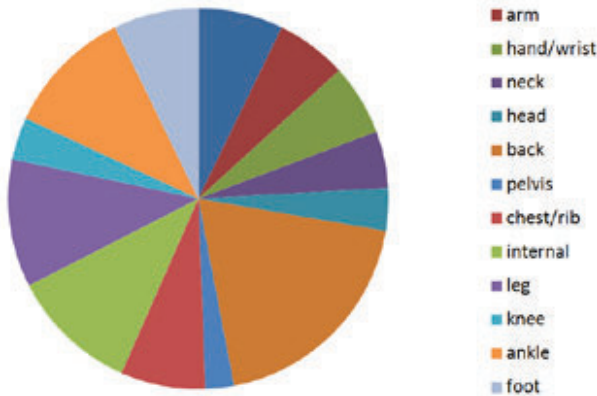
2009 Phase of Flight



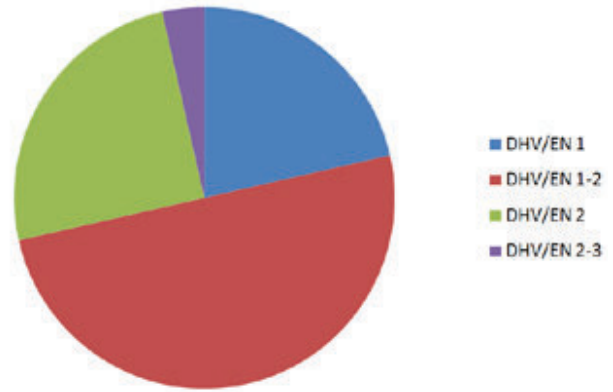
2009 Age of Accident Pilot



2009 Injuries Cited



2009 Wing Rating



pilot failed to steer toward the tow.

Two tandem injuries were reported, both being pileups that injured the passenger, one in a muddy LZ, one on launch. The latter was caused by the passenger's jumping up, a subsequent frontal collapse, then a tumble off a ledge.

There were no "bad landings" this year, because all those problems could be traced to an earlier point-in-time.

Preflight errors, often so described by the pilot, included decisions to fly in poor conditions, as well as failure to clear lines carefully when the launch was small or

unforgiving. Inflation or launch errors were typically unsuccessful attempts to salvage a bad start.

Approach problems included inability to glide to the desired LZ, incomplete recovery from turbulence encountered near the ground, or a hard landing due to terrain, sharp turns, or lack of a flare.

Flight problems included some incidents where the pilot accidentally hit an obstacle while soaring (or got crowded into one), some where pilots encountered a problem and then made matters worse, and some where the pilot did everything

right but was still unable to salvage a bad situation. The latter ones are especially worrisome to experienced pilots. For example, a 90% collapse went immediately into a hard spiral with riser twists, and the pilot was unable to reach above the twists or to pull out the reserve, due to extreme g forces. After two tries at each, the reserve finally fell out on its own, but went up through the twisted wing. The result was a very hard impact on the ground.

As usual, the pilots having accidents are a bit younger than you would expect from the membership demographics, so

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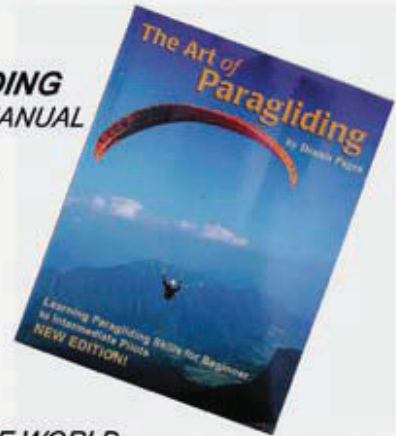
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maybe experience counts, or maybe it has more to do with flying hours.

The types of injuries encountered pretty much span the entire anatomy. Back injuries continue to be the number one risk, as well as ones with potentially severe consequences. One pilot points out that even with as many as 7 broken vertebrae, you can't necessarily feel the injury. He hiked down the mountain, at great risk of spinal damage. Another pilot intentionally did a butt landing, a decision he regrets. When coming in hard, three feet of legs is a much better shock absorber than four inches of foam! Haul yourself into an up-

right position, with the risers if necessary, and prepare for a PLF.

The type of wing does not seem to determine the risk of accident, at least according to my perception of how many of each wing are out there. A couple of accidents occurred by pilots on an unfamiliar wing or maybe one level above their ability, but there were no obvious mismatches this year.

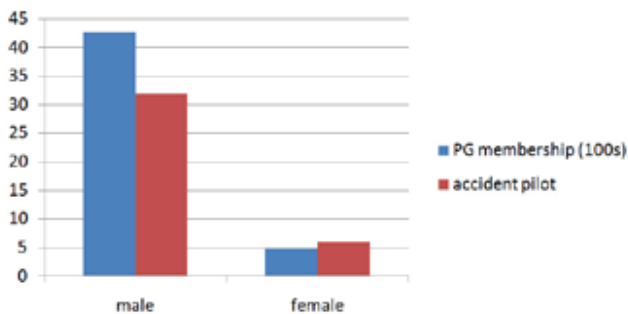
We know many accidents are not reported, and we can speculate how this might distort the results. Is there a gender bias introduced by the macho pilots who fail to file a report lest they have to admit

to fallibility? Nights spent in a hospital (60% of 2009 accidents!) seem to help some come to terms with their mortality, others not. In any case, women were over-represented this year, but not by as much as I had initially thought.

Finally, the pilot rating is only loosely related to frequency of accidents, though the type of accident does shift considerably as pilots gain experience.

Now, with this sobering experience behind me, I am ready to try my hot new 2-riser comp wing scheduled to arrive this week. Here's hoping I've learned enough to still be around next tax season! 🇺🇸

2009 Gender of Accident Pilot



2009 Pilot Rating

