

WANTED

Sifting through misreports and chasing new leads, the author pieces together a theory on how Steve Fossett, one of history's most accomplished aviators, simply disappeared.

by Peter Heller



T

HE SUN BOILED OVER THE HORIZON. IT WHITENED as it rose, and the dry lake beds and alkali flats scattered over the Great Basin bleached hard, like bone. Even for Nevada, Labor Day 2007 arrived parched; a lingering drought had left a good portion of the state scarred with fires. The paved airstrip at hotel magnate

Barron Hilton's Flying M Ranch was cool. No wind, just a stirring of tall, dry grass at the edge of the runway that brought with it a smell of cut hay and sage. The ranch was shadowed by the bulk of Mount Grant, and on the far side of the main house and cabins the East Walker River ran cold in its banks.

Sometime between eight and nine that morning, Steve Fossett walked out onto the airfield. At 63, he had already shattered more than 100 records in aviation, sailing, and ballooning. He was the first man to circumnavigate the world solo, nonstop, in a balloon, and the first man to circle the earth in a jet-powered plane without refueling. His latest challenge was to flatten the world land speed record, aiming for more than 800 mph using a jet-powered vehicle. The project was nearing consummation. Now, between everything, he was visiting his old friend Hilton.

The plane was a beauty, a little tandem two-seater Bellanca Citabria Super Decathlon with stylized stars spraying fans of white light across its blue tail and wings. With a 180-hp engine and a superlight airframe made of wood, cloth, and aluminum tubing, it was built for aerobatics, for fun, not for getting from point to point. A skilled pilot like Fossett could fly it 30 feet off the ground, up a twisting canyon, or barrel-roll it over a lake. If you were good you could put it down in a clearing the size of a soccer field. There were other planes in the fleet at the Flying M that Fossett could have picked, but he picked that one. It was clear that that morning he had a certain kind of flying in mind.

When Fossett climbed into the cockpit he was wearing only sweatpants, a T-shirt, and tennis shoes. The air temperature was already 80 degrees, and he didn't expect to be gone that long. He was scheduled to be back for lunch at the ranch by noon, with his private jet waiting to whisk him away to other appointments after that. He did not bother to toss his usual survival kit — his go bag — into the plane, a pack that held a satellite phone, some food, and clothes. He carried a bottle of water. He owned a Breitling Emergency watch, given to him by old friend, supporter, and Virgin Atlantic founder Richard Branson. The watch has a small knob on the side of the heavy titanium case, and twisting it off exposes an antenna that broadcasts a distress signal. But what's not widely known is that Fossett left the watch behind that morning. He may have had other things on his mind. Earlier in the day it is believed he'd had a rare fight with his wife of 39 years, Peggy, and he was visibly upset.

He started the engine and taxied to the north end of the runway. He shoved the throttle knob to the dash, and the Decathlon leapt forward. The jaunty plane gathered speed and lifted off. It rose into the south, passed the first ridge of the East Walker's narrow canyon, and flew out of sight. And then one of the most renowned aviators in history vanished off the face of the earth.

WHAT FOLLOWED OVER THE NEXT MONTH, AFTER FOSSETT didn't return to the ranch that day, was possibly the largest manhunt ever launched. The Civil Air Patrol (CAP), an auxiliary wing of the air force that almost always gets its man, brought in planes from Oregon, California, Idaho, Utah, and Arizona. Little Cessna 182s with crews

■ A Bellanca Citabria Super Decathlon, top left, like the one Fossett was flying September 3. The pilot, below left, 16 months prior, at the National Air and Space Museum, presenting the plane he used to make the first nonstop solo flight around the world without refueling.





■ A Black Hawk, above, hoists a searcher investigating debris. In looking for Fossett, searchers came across six other crash sites, one of which had never been marked. The Hilton ranch's private airstrip, right, from which Fossett took off.



of three searched the old-fashioned way — with the naked eye. Grid by grid. At one point the CAP had 26 planes flying sorties out of Minden, the nearest airport. They carried a direction finder, which can track a plane's emergency locator transmitter (ELT) beacon — the last best friend of a pilot going down, activated automatically on impact by G-forces or manually by a pilot on the ground. One Cessna from Utah carried ARCHER hyperspectral imaging technology, which can spot anything on the ground that's not natural. "They even gave it one of the wheel pants off the Decathlon to analyze," said CAP spokeswoman Major Cynthia Ryan. "Like giving a hound a sock to sniff."

The Nevada National Guard brought in two Black Hawk helicopters and two Kiowa search choppers with advanced camera systems. From the first night, they sent C-130 turboprops, which began flying in rotation 24 hours a day. The big planes were outfitted with FLIR — forward-looking infrared — which "can see a coyote running through the desert at night," according to National Guard spokeswoman Captain April Conway. They also carried Scatheview, a video imaging system that relays live feed to analysts onboard and on the ground.

And from the Flying M itself, Hilton launched his own private air force, staffed partly with volunteers and partly with paid crews (including a team from Blackwater, the paramilitary firm). Semi trucks carrying Jetranger helicopters began rattling down the washboard dirt road to Hilton's superprivate million-acre ranch. At the height of the search, upward of 15 helicopters and 10 fixed-wing aircraft were deployed from the Flying M, working up to 14 hours a day. "They had guys out there in choppers who had searched for Bin Laden in Iraq and Afghanistan," says Jim Herd, an acquaintance of Fossett's who ferried friends into the ranch. "And astronauts. They had former

astronauts poring over radar data." Hilton, in his 80s, oversaw it all, sparing no expense, stalking his hangar command post with a big cigar, looking grim.

There were so many aircraft flying at once that they had to separate the public and private searches, letting Hilton's people fly the eastern grids in the morning and the CAP the western, then swapping in the afternoon. Ground teams of up to 75 people scoured the canyons on ATVs. The search area grew to 22,000 square miles.

In case this all wasn't enough, Branson enlisted his friends at Google, who supplied the public with updated Google Earth satellite images of the entire area, so that thousands of private citizens on personal computers could scan the ground for a wreck. Amazon set up a website, and in the time it took a techie to polish his glasses and lick his lips, the hotlines were ringing off the hook. "I had a lady call me saying she had found Fossett riding a horse into Utah," said Captain Bill Schroeder of the CAP.

Every shred of a real lead was followed up, but in the end the fierce Nevada landscape gave up nothing but a wind-blasted silence.

Amelia Earhart disappeared in the vast, stormy reaches of the Pacific in a time before satellites and Black Hawks, and it's a mystery that haunts the soul of aviation. But the case of Steve Fossett is even more curious. With so many resources devoted to finding him, how could he simply disappear in the middle of the United States?

ON OCTOBER 7, FOUR days after the public search was officially suspended, I drove to Minden to try to answer that question. I walked into the airport's Tail Dragger Café and

ordered coffee. A big window looked out over a dozen tied-down planes and the wooded ridges of the Pine Nut Mountains. It was just past 1 PM, but two pilots were already into the house pale ale, and one was playing video poker at a screen set into the bar.

"So what happened to Steve Fossett?" I asked as an icebreaker.

One of the drinkers put down his glass. "He's down in Mexico drinking a Corona."

The poker player hit a plastic button hard. "Damn!" He swung around. "Look, the plane was made of wood and cloth and aluminum tubing. It burned. It'd be like stripping the webbing off a lawn chair, painting it black, and tossing it into the weeds."

Wouldn't it make a burn mark?

"Half the state burned last summer. Which burn do you look at?"

I found a Cessna 182 to rent. I'm a pilot, but I wasn't checked out here, so I found a CAP pilot to fly me. His name was Arden Heffernan, he was in his 60s, and he had flown most of his life. I asked him if he could take me over the search area.

With no flight plan filed by Fossett, the first variable to consider was distance. The Decathlon could carry 40 gallons of fuel, enough for four hours of flight. At altitudes above the 5,000-foot elevation of the Flying M runway, the plane could cruise comfortably at about 95 knots, or just over 100 mph. This meant that Fossett could conceivably have flown 400 miles. Allowing for a return trip, the maximum outbound distance would have been no more than 200 miles, and given his tight schedule, he probably would have stayed even closer to home. Still, a lot of very rough country was within a 50-mile radius. The California line, backed by the high Sierras, was only some 15 miles to the south and west, and the tortured valleys and rock monoliths of Yosemite National Park were just 25 miles or so

PREVIOUS SPREAD: PLANE: ERIC VAN GILDERING/PHOTO.COM; FOSSETT: SHAWN THEW/ALAMY; THIS PAGE: BLACK HAWK: J. VAN ALLEN SR.; AIRSTRIP: RICH PEDRONCEL/ALAMY PHOTO

beyond that. Nevada itself has more than 300 mountain ranges.

One theory was that he had taken off on a one-way trip, running away from his current life, or even from life itself. But that didn't carry much weight. He was in his prime and had everything to live for. Herd said that when he'd met Fossett at a big fly-in in Oshkosh, Wisconsin, in July, he was excited about his new projects, especially the land speed record. "He was an unassuming man: humble, kind. Once he offered to help me put away my glider." Not the kind of man who would put a lot of people out.

So if he'd gone for a short joyride, what kind of trouble did he run into? The Sierras, on the Nevada side, offer some of the most challenging and rewarding flying in the world. Extreme turbulence is common along the eastern face of the mountains, and fierce winds can kick up and generate downdrafts on the backsides of ridges that can drop a plane 1,000 feet in seconds, though it's doubtful that Fossett could have encountered these gusts, as they kick up in the afternoon. His fuel limit would have grounded him by 1 PM, and he had appointments to keep before then.

There are many things that can happen to a small plane flying in country this rugged: flying low over the ground or lake and hitting turbulence, clipping a wing on a tree or rock in a tight canyon, smacking a power line. Or following one's nose up a climbing canyon only to find that it boxes out at the top with not enough room to turn back around and not enough power to climb over the ridge. One of the best glider pilots in the world, Fossett knew the nuances of wind and canyon better than almost anybody, so it is hard to imagine him making these kinds of errors on a normal day.

Heffernan and I lifted off and headed east. The beauty of the Carson Valley shocked me. High mountains dusted with snow rose to the south and west, bounding a bottomland of hay fields. The hills were scrubbed with sage and rabbit brush, but the little canyon of the East Walker was crowded with cottonwoods, poplars, willows. We flew over the California line, scanning pine-covered ridges — thousands and thousands of trees, pooling shadows, each of which could have hidden a burnt wreck crumpled at its base.

"You could fly over that spot a hundred times and not see a thing," said Heffernan into his headset. "The hundred and first, you could spot some wreckage."

LATE DINNER AT THE TAIL DRAGGER. MY MIND BUZZED with a cascade of information. I had been talking to officials and searchers, and now I sifted through what I thought I knew. Important details that had been reported in the press were wrong. It was not true, for instance, that Fossett had been out scouting dry lake beds for his land speed record, or that he was wearing the Breitling watch. Then there were leads I had just heard about. A California highway patrolman was writing a citation at the Mammoth cutoff when he looked up and saw what he swears was the plane. Not impossible, as the place was straight down the Highway 395 corridor, a route Fossett liked to fly. But the afternoon sighting seemed too late to jibe with Fossett's schedule. There was a pilot coming in at South Lake Tahoe who heard a loud ELT bleed through a radio transmission. It lasted a few seconds and died, a signature consistent with a plane crashing into a lake and submerging. But no satellite had picked up the beacon, and, besides, there were many people out on Tahoe boating that morning, so the lead was discounted.

I called Jim Herd, the pilot acquaintance of Fossett's.

What am I missing?

"The cowboy."

Huh?

"Ask about the cowboy who saw him fly over."

What else?

"The radar trace."

What radar trace?

"I saw it out at the ranch. Showed a track east of Nine Mile, dropping out south of Hawthorne."

Jesus.

The next morning I called an official close to the investigation who insisted on remaining anonymous. "The cowboy's name is Rawley," he said. "He's an employee of Hilton's ranch. He was out at Nine Mile." Nine Mile is a ranchstead 15 miles south of the Flying M airstrip. It's an open hanging valley of hay fields and sage flats. "Saw a plane fly over. He knew the plane."

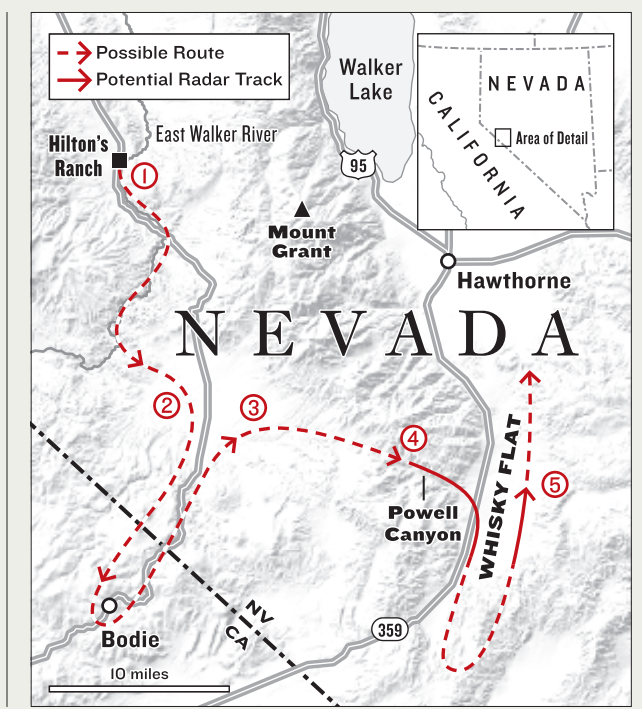
What time?

"Well, he wasn't wearing a watch, but he was talking to his girlfriend in Oregon on his cell phone. At one point he said, 'I can't go anywhere without being watched!' He (continued on page 114)

FOSSETT'S PROBABLE COURSE

THE AUTHOR, A PILOT, USED CREDIBLE SIGHTINGS, RADAR TRACKING, and other little-known information about Fossett's last flight to deduce a possible route. Then he retraced it himself.

1. Fossett takes off from Barron Hilton's Flying M Ranch between 8 and 9:10 AM on September 3.
2. A cowboy spots Hilton's Bellanca Citabria Super Decathlon heading south, just west of Nine Mile ranch. The cowboy is not wearing a watch, but he is on his cell phone at the time, and records later show he made three calls between 8 and 9:30 AM.
3. Some time later the cowboy sees the same plane now heading east, in the general direction of Powell Canyon.
4. At 9:53 AM radar picks up a plane crossing the Wassuk Range at an angle of 110 degrees, the same angle as Powell Canyon. On the other side of the mountain, the plane dips south down Whiskey Flat valley, before being lost by radar. That could be caused by the plane descending below range or by mountains blocking the radar.
5. A short time later radar intermittently picks up a plane flying north through Whiskey Flat, before the trace dies at 10:06 AM, south of Hawthorne and a few miles short of Walker Lake. Search-and-rescue would later comb the lake but find no signs of wreckage. The plane could have continued, in a radar void, into the northern range of Mount Grant, full of steep canyons.



thought it was his boss flying over. The phone records show three calls between eight and nine-thirty."

What did he see?

"The plane flying over, heading south. Then he says he saw it fly over again between 11 and 11:30, heading east toward Powell Canyon."

I then called Guy Loughridge, in Steamboat Springs, Colorado, to confirm what Herd had told me about the radar trace. Loughridge is one of the best radar analysts in the country. He works closely with the government, using his software to meld data from a variety of agencies. He told me that the Department of Defense had been studying a "track of value" in the area within hours of the first overdue report on Fossett. He described it in as much detail as he could without revealing classified information. This track, he says, was unusual in that so few "go in a couple different directions, maybe loop back. That would be the type of behavior we'd expect from someone out pleasure-flying." Exactly what Steve Fossett was out to do.

THE NEXT MORNING I ASKED HERD TO FLY me in his Bonanza, a gleaming late-model single-engine. I had pieced together a route for Fossett that seemed to match every credible lead I had. I asked him to fly at 100 knots, the cruising speed of the Decathlon. The morning was clear and calm, as it had been on Labor Day, and we passed over the Flying M at around 9 AM.

On our left loomed Mount Grant; to the right, bald, dry hills and ridges, thirsty sage flats. We

sailed over the lodge and tennis courts, the runway, and the dark ribbon of the East Walker River winding by. We followed it south, upstream, over narrow fields, past a corral, and we climbed when the river hit a ridge and cut into the first rocky slash of its canyon.

If I were Fossett in that nimble plane I would have stayed in the canyon. Low and slow, nosing up along the river, loving the closeness of the walls, the poplars and willows just below me, the smell of water. The river snaked south, a lush, sinuous thread in a parched country, and I would have followed it.

The East Walker broke into a lovely wet meadow, then the wide sweep of the Nine Mile ranchstead opened on the left, the east. It would be instinctive to turn here and climb up onto green hay fields, to pass the neat cluster of houses and outbuildings in the cove of tall cottonwoods.

A high wall of ridge blocked the east side of the hanging valley. Might as well turn southwest and head for the ghost town of Bodie. Fly up the canyon of the Bodie River and circle the perfectly preserved mining town that looked like everybody had just walked away one day in the 1890s. Then meander back over the fields of Nine Mile and now turn east toward the high ridge. This is what Rawley on his horse would have seen: the plane flying over once, south, then back over again, heading east.

The lowest, most obvious pass over this ridge is to the left, the northern end of the ridge, through a saddle called Lucky Boy Pass. Fossett had probably flown it a dozen times.

Today, try something new. That dip of ridge more to the south looks promising.

So we turned toward Powell Canyon. This is about where Loughridge had picked up the first trace, at 9:53 AM. It doesn't match Rawley's sighting of the plane heading toward the canyon around 11, but then he wasn't wearing a watch and he had his mind on his girl.

We crossed the ridge and followed the wooded crease of the canyon down into a sere valley the color of dusty deer hide. Loughridge said the plane descended the ridge at 125 knots, heading 110 degrees, which fits with the speed of the Decathlon and matches the direction of the canyon. Then the trace banked almost due south. The valley here, called Whiskey Flat, runs roughly north-south, and, again, this makes sense. Loughridge said the trace showed the plane 2,000 to 2,500 feet above ground level, proceeding at 105 knots. We did too. It was a natural altitude for taking in the country. And then the trace disappeared, into a shadow behind ridges the radar couldn't see.

A few minutes later a second trace was seen coming back north on the other side of the valley. It was flying almost the same altitude and going about the same speed as the first trace. It's reasonable to assume that this was the same plane, looping back north and heading for the town of Hawthorne and Walker Lake. It had to be Fossett. We too banked north and followed the route.

Here the track of the mystery plane became intermittent, then was lost for good. "It went into a radar void," said Loughridge. "No sign of distress."

Hawthorne came into sight, its neat parallel streets crossing an island of trees in a desert wasteland. Now we could see clearly the hundreds and hundreds of bomb bunkers in their rows around the town. We dropped lower to see, below 6,000 feet, just as Fossett would have done.

Now, the spirit tugs toward the lake, the blue open water. This is a harsh world, of steep crags and scorched valleys, and anywhere there is water, there is respite. Could Fossett have buzzed the lake, feet off the surface, hit some rough air, snagged a wing, and tumbled in? I thought so. But the lake was searched by two separate county search-and-rescue dive teams with side-scan sonar, and then by divers from a private firm that Hilton hired to go over it again.

We followed the west side of Walker Lake, hard up against the back side of Mount Grant, which extended in a range to the north. The mountain slope was cut with steeply climbing ravines and canyons. Fossett, with all his gliding experience, would have known better than anyone the dangers of a climbing canyon. I thought he would have kept following the lake, right over the hamlet and green cottonwoods of Schurz.

Finally there was a broad opening in the range on our left, treeless and dust-colored, with a dirt road running through it. Reese Canyon. This was the way home. We turned into it. As we rounded the end of the range and headed south again toward the Flying M, we could see the slopes of Bald Mountain ahead — wooded, steep — and a radio tower on the peak. Herd told me that a friend of his

BE ENORMOUS.
BECOME
AN URBAN
LEGEND.



Australian for Beer.

at the National Transportation Safety Board had said that a weak, short ELT signal had been picked up on this slope of the mountain on the morning Fossett disappeared.

And then, just before 11, I saw the Flying M Ranch again, nestled in green fields along the river. The timing, the route, all seemed right. Could Fossett have come this way and gone down in sight of home, on the flank of this heedless mountain? He'd been distraught, not quite himself, and he was almost home. He was thinking ahead now, about other things — Peggy, lunch, appointments — and he made a mistake. He got too close to a ridge and clipped a rock outcrop or a tree, or tried to climb out of one of the mountain draws and noticed too late that he wasn't going to make it over. He crashed and burned. Because he had been out about two hours and had used up a lot of his fuel, the fire was enough to burn up most of the plane, the cloth skin and the wooden struts and wings, but it wasn't enough to make a big burn. And that was it. Maybe one day a hunter will stumble across some curious debris.

Herd and I ate dinner at the Tail Dragger, and I went back to my motel. That night the wind came up, the temperature dropped to near freezing, and it poured rain in Minden. On the mountain slopes, just a few hundred feet above town, the rain would be snow. It would cast a fresh dusting over the woods and etch the rock outcrops and cliffs. I lay on my motel bed listening to the wind, and I couldn't sleep. It was cold out there. I kept thinking about a man alone in those hills. It didn't matter that the man was famous and that hundreds of people had loved him and tried everything they could think of to find him. Dead or alive, he was alone in the dark. I thought of the new snow falling through the trees, covering the man's head and the scattered pieces of a broken plane. **M**

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NIGERIA *continued from page 105*

to the Agbami platform, then lowered onto suction piles driven into the seabed nearly a mile below the surface. Within a couple of months tankers from around the world will begin filling up with crude from the floating platform. "Everything's going offshore," the Chevron man tells me, between bites of a pork chop. "It's the wave of the future."

I spend the night at Stevens's house, and just before dawn I walk out the front gate of the compound to meet my taxi. A couple of hookers are waiting for their rides home. I stand for a few minutes in the semidarkness before the security guard realizes what I am doing. MEND rebels often stake out the compound, he tells me, and the hours around dawn, when the streets are empty and getaways easy, are prime kidnapping time. "You a crazy man?" he says. "You come back inside. Now!"

NOT EVERY EXPAT IN PORT HARCOURT HAS played it so cautiously. Even after the kidnappings began, one of Stevens's friends, 48-year-old Louisianan Billy Graham, felt comfortable enough to continue to ride his motorcycle through the city and surrounding villages, and commute across town every day in a car without escorts. He had moved to the Niger delta in 1992, after a decade working Alaska's North Slope. He set up his own oil-related consulting and construction firm and immersed himself in Nigerian life, marrying a young local woman and starting a family. "I thought I was untouchable," he says. "That was my mistake."

One morning last February, Graham was driving to work with his partner Neil Mirrlees when two vehicles rammed his Peugeot sedan, one from the front, the other from behind. Four gunmen climbed into his car. One put a Beretta to Graham's head and ordered him to drive to the Bonny River. There, he and Mirrlees were forced to lie facedown in a speedboat and were taken to a mudflat across from their construction yard. After dark their captors shoved them into a canoe and paddled upstream for hours to a hideout on a palm-covered island in a mangrove swamp — "like something out of Vietnam," Graham recalls.

The two were confined to a small shelter made of palm fronds and given two-inch-thick mats to sleep on. "That first night, I told Neil, 'You need to prepare your mind. We're going to be here a long time,'" Graham says. Their captors — simple opportunists, he believes, members of a local youth gang — told him they were demanding 1.8 billion naira (about \$14 million) ransom from the Nigerian government, which ordinarily handles both the negotiations and the payments to rebels. (The oil companies insist they don't pay ransoms, but security officials told me that the companies contribute to a slush fund administered by the Nigerian government.)

At first Graham tried to think of it as an adventure. He'd been through worse. In Alaska he'd crashed his single-engine plane in the mountains and had to walk five days, injured, before reaching safety. But the kidnapping ordeal soon took its toll. The men were ravaged by mosquitoes during the night and sun flies

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