

SONOMA COUNTY
HOT AIR BALLOON CLASSIC

Program Guide

July 19 - 20, 2025

On behalf of myself and all the volunteers who help organize this event, I am very excited to welcome you to the **Sonoma County Hot Air Balloon Classic!**

We begin before dawn, setting up the hot air balloons in the cool morning air for The Glow Show. This staple of our festival features balloons glowing to music before the sun rises, showcasing the intricacies of their canopies and providing excellent photo opportunities. This exciting kickoff to the morning might mean you only need one cup of coffee!

Our announcers will entertain us with music, stories, and information about hot air balloons. During this time, pilots will meet with the FAA to discuss air traffic, the expected weather, and winds aloft. You might even see a small balloon called a Piball released into the air, giving pilots a hyper-localized idea of wind directions. Upon FAA approval, the balloons will begin preparing for the main launch, allowing you to observe the numerous crew members and volunteers as they work under the direction of the Pilot and Crew Chief. Please allow the crew ample space to work and keep your youngsters close by. There will always be plenty of volunteer opportunities in the coming years.

As the balloons prepare, the National Anthem will be performed live, with one balloon carrying the American flag aloft, allowing us to show our respect with a moment of observance. Shortly after, the Launch Director and team will coordinate the launch of the remaining balloons. As the balloons soar above, you'll witness the dance of the balloons as pilots change altitude, catching the wind and moving in various directions. The intricacies of flying a hot air balloon are not always obvious, but based on weather patterns, the balloons may return to the launch field or land at a different location, where they will be retrieved, packed up by their crew, and returned to the fairgrounds. Additional tethered rides will be offered at the end of the main launch field (see the map on the back of the program guide), providing an opportunity for all to experience a sample of a full hot air balloon flight. Unfortunately, hot air balloons are at the mercy of the weather. While our pilots are highly trained and technically skilled, safety is our top priority. The decision to fly ultimately rests with the FAA and the pilots. So, let's think good thoughts and hope for calm air.

Finally, I want to extend a big thank you to my fellow board members for all their efforts and hard work over the past few years. Our board is made up of a variety of talented, ambitious, and dedicated volunteers who have worked tirelessly to make this event not only affordable but also memorable for you, our community. Without our community, we wouldn't be Sonoma Strong.

Thank you for joining us and supporting the SCHABC non-profit. If you would like to support us or get involved in planning the event, please stop by the information booth or email us at info@schabc.org.

Here's to another 30+ years of ballooning!

Sincerely,



SCHABC President



SCHEDULE OF EVENTS

4:00 AM • *Gates open*

5:00 AM • *Glow show*

6:00 AM • *Tethered rides and kids area open*

6:30 AM • *Main launch*



ANNOUNCER: MICHELLE MARQUES



Michelle Marques is a radio host and content producer at KRCB 104.9FM, Sonoma County's NPR station. Michelle is the writer and producer of a weekly program on KRCB called "The 707" and she also hosts a music program called Connections every Thursday evening. Michelle absolutely loves hot air balloons, and helped to organize this event in past years. The very first balloon she flew in was Panda, and a black lab named Bear was one of the passengers along with her on her inaugural flight. Michelle is also an illustrator, and her first children's book was published in 2020, titled "What Makes You Smile As Big As The Moon?"

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

Will I be able to ride in a balloon during the event?

- Yes, since the number of rides we are able to offer each day depends on the weather; we only have rides available for purchase the day-of the event. There are two options:
 - Tethered Rides – We have multiple balloons that will be offering rides during the event and run until it is too breezy or too warm to safely carry passengers; or there is no longer enough fuel to continue operations. To ride, get in the designated line; you can pay with cash or credit card when you arrive at the front. The ride lasts a few minutes. Children under 10 must be accompanied by an adult. Minimum age of a rider is up to the discretion of the pilot, as they are responsible for passenger safety. You may ask the crew of the specific balloon you wish to ride, if your child is approved by the pilot to ride
 - Instant Sponsorship – Part of an instant sponsorship includes a full ride in a hot air balloon. Wave to thousands of your new closest friends as you lift off during the event. You can even help out the crew when you land if you wish! Availability in the balloons is very limited so listen for the announcer to say how many spots have opened up; the first people to the sponsor booth will be able to take the spot. Instant sponsorships are \$300, cash and credit card accepted. We are a registered 501(c)(3) non-profit and your instant sponsorship is a donation to keep the event running.

May I go out on the launch field?

- For the glow show, please remain outside the barriers as there is a lot of activity setting up the balloons in the dark. Once it is safe, the announcer will let you know you may enter the launch field to take photos and see the balloons. During the main launch you can be on the field. Please be aware that we need room for balloons to bring in, set up, and take down. Be ready to move if a crew member asks you to, stay off tarps, and keep an eye out for ropes. Chairs, blankets, and strollers are not allowed on the launch field until after main launch.

Is smoking allowed?

- We are a no smoking event. If you need to you may smoke out near the main entrance

May I use my drone at the event?

- No, the event is an FAA restricted airspace. Drones may not be flown.

May I take photos?

- Certainly yes! The balloons provide an amazing photo opportunity that provide extremely colorful photos. If you have any great photos, you want to share please do so:
 - Facebook: /SonomaCountyBalloons
 - Twitter: /SonomaBalloons
 - Instagram: @SCHABC

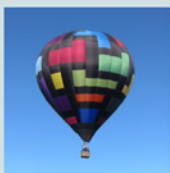




THE BALLOONS AND PILOTS



JIM ABELL - KIPHAVEN (ALAMEDA, CALIFORNIA)



Jim Abell has been flying balloons since 2000 and has been a member of the SCHABC team since 2004, participating as a dawn patrol pilot. He has also been part of the Great Reno Balloon Race Dawn Patrol for over 12 years. Jim currently resides on a sailboat in Alameda, CA.

ROBERT BURNS - WOLF SPIRIT (RENO, NEVADA)



Robert Burns has been around balloons since childhood and has always been fascinated by them. As he got older, he pursued his dream of becoming a pilot. When he's not flying, Robert enjoys being outdoors and spending time with friends.

DAVID DUNRUD - SERENDIPITY (GEYSERVILLE, CALIFORNIA)



David Dunrud grew up immersed in the sport of ballooning, inspired by his aunt who has flown for over 35 years. He began crewing at age 11 in Napa Valley and earned his student certificate at 14. David has attended every year of the Sonoma County Hot Air Balloon Classic. When he's not flying, he serves his community as a Firefighter EMT.

EMILY ECKERMAN - RAVEN (NAPA, CALIFORNIA)



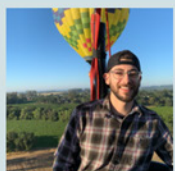
Emily Eckerman lives in Napa Valley with her two children. Her balloon, Raven, is named after her father's Navy call sign. A commercial pilot in training, Emily also works at a local nonprofit farm. She enjoys time in the redwoods, campfires, and a good joke - though she claims to hate writing bios.

SEAN GERRITY - WOODY (SONOMA, CALIFORNIA)



Sean is an enthusiastic Balloonist! Flying and adventuring for decades! One year being Santa Clause, flying over Sonoma County, dropping candy canes to children of all ages below! Currently he owns Santa Rosa Ballooning, right here in northern Sonoma County! Sean loves to fly and share the joy with everyone! Find him @: Santarosaballoonning.com

MATEO HERNANDEZ - NIAKIMA (SONOMA, CALIFORNIA)



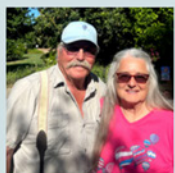
Mateo Hernandez, a Sonoma County native, joined the ballooning community at 17 as a crew member. He quickly earned his private pilot's license and purchased his first balloon. Now an FAA-certified commercial pilot, Mateo shares the joy of ballooning with locals and visitors alike through Sonoma Ballooning.



THE BALLOONS AND PILOTS

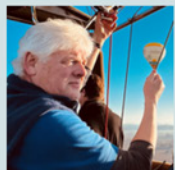


RUSS AND GAY JAMES - WANDERER (ORLAND, CALIFORNIA)



Russ and Gay James are experienced commercial pilots who have participated in the event for many years. They are excited to return to the festival this year. Don't hesitate to say hello when you see Wanderer standing tall.

MIKE KIJAK - SONOMA STAR (SANTA ROSA, CALIFORNIA)



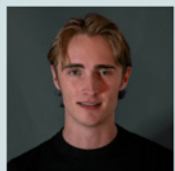
Mike Kijak began ballooning in 1993 and turned his passion into a career in 1999 after being laid off. Alongside his wife Patty, he founded Up & Away Ballooning in Sonoma County, growing the business to include three balloons, one of which was the only wheelchair-accessible balloon basket in the country. After selling the business in 2015, Mike "retired" to Bend, OR but has since returned to Sonoma County to be closer to his grandchildren and to continue flying locally.

JAYSON KIMBAL - YODA (NAPA, CALIFORNIA)



Jayson Kimbal is a second-generation balloon pilot who took his first flight as a baby. He will celebrate 30 years as a commercially rated lighter-than-air pilot in August 2025. Jayson owns and operates one of the largest balloon ride companies in the United States and has been a Star Wars fan since birth.

COLBY KIMBALL - EXPLORER (NAPA, CALIFORNIA)



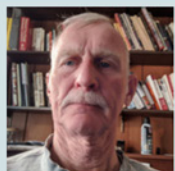
Colby is a commercial hot air balloon pilot, filmmaker, and founder of Aerostatic, a modern ballooning project focused on making flight more accessible and inspiring the next generation of adventurers.

JUSTIN KINSINGER - DARTH VADER (SANTA ROSA, CA)



Justin Kinsinger is a second-generation pilot whose passion for ballooning began in childhood during flights with his grandfather. He earned his private license in 2005 and his commercial license in 2012. With more than 600 hours of flight time, Justin has flown in five countries and at festivals across the U.S., always seeking new perspectives and thrilling adventures.

GARY MICHALEK - ASSES ALOFT (LAFAYETTE, CALIFORNIA)



Gary Michalek, from Lafayette, CA, took his first balloon ride as his first flying lesson. He bought his first balloon at a garage sale and has been a pilot for over 25 years. He's only flown off with the keys in his pocket once.



THE BALLOONS AND PILOTS



GARY MORGAN - GARY'S BALLOON (SEDONA, ARIZONA)



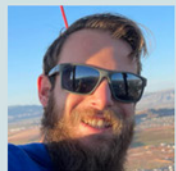
Gary Morgan got into ballooning in 1978 after taking a class at the University of Houston and was instantly hooked. He bought his first balloon in 1980 after moving to Dallas and now flies as a hobby at festivals across the U.S., as well as in Canada and Mexico. France is still on his bucket list. The name "Gary's Balloon" came from a crew member's offhand comment—and it stuck. Now it's Gary's balloon, trailer, crew, RV, van... and sometimes, Gary's fault. His balloon is a Lindstrand 90, built in Galena, Illinois, holding 90,000 cubic feet and carrying the pilot plus two or three passengers.

DAVID ROBINSON - TIGER MOTH (HALF MOON BAY, CALIFORNIA)



David Robinson discovered ballooning in high school, where he began building and flying balloons. A lifelong passion, ballooning led David to careers in meteorology and education. He has received both the Balloon Federation of America's Ed Yost Master Pilot Award and the FAA's Wright Brothers Master Pilot Award. David taught mathematics and meteorology at The College of San Mateo.

ROB SEWELL - FROST FIRE (RENO, NEVADA)



Rob Sewell has been passionate about ballooning since birth, never missing a Reno balloon race. He earned his pilot certificate at 25 and is now a balloon repairman in Northern Nevada. Rob flies almost every weekend and enjoys teaching students in his spare time.

DANA THORTON - FREESPIRIT (MORGAN HILL, CALIFORNIA)



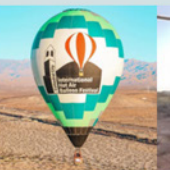
Dana Thorton began his aviation journey in 1977 with a fixed-wing private pilot license and started ballooning in 1978. He has flown dawn patrol since 1981 and has attended every Great Reno Balloon Race Dawn Patrol since 1984. With more than 800 hours in fixed-wing aircraft and 1,900 in balloons, Dana is a BFA Level 6 Master Aeronaut and frequent safety seminar speaker. His balloon, Free Spirit, has been flying since 1986.

DAVID WAKEFIELD - REMAX (SACRAMENTO, CALIFORNIA)



David Wakefield co-owns Cheers Aerial Media in Sacramento with his wife Shelly. He operates the Northern California Re/Max balloon program and serves as president of the Pacific Coast Aeronauts. David holds a Commercial Pilot certificate and a British Balloon and Airship license. He has worked with numerous corporate balloon programs, including United Van Lines, Bacardi Mixers, Brooks and Dunn, and Energizer.

JUSTIN AND STEVE WILKINSON - CATHEDRAL CITY AND COSMIC CRISP (PALM SPRINGS, CALIFORNIA)

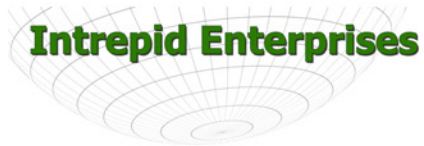


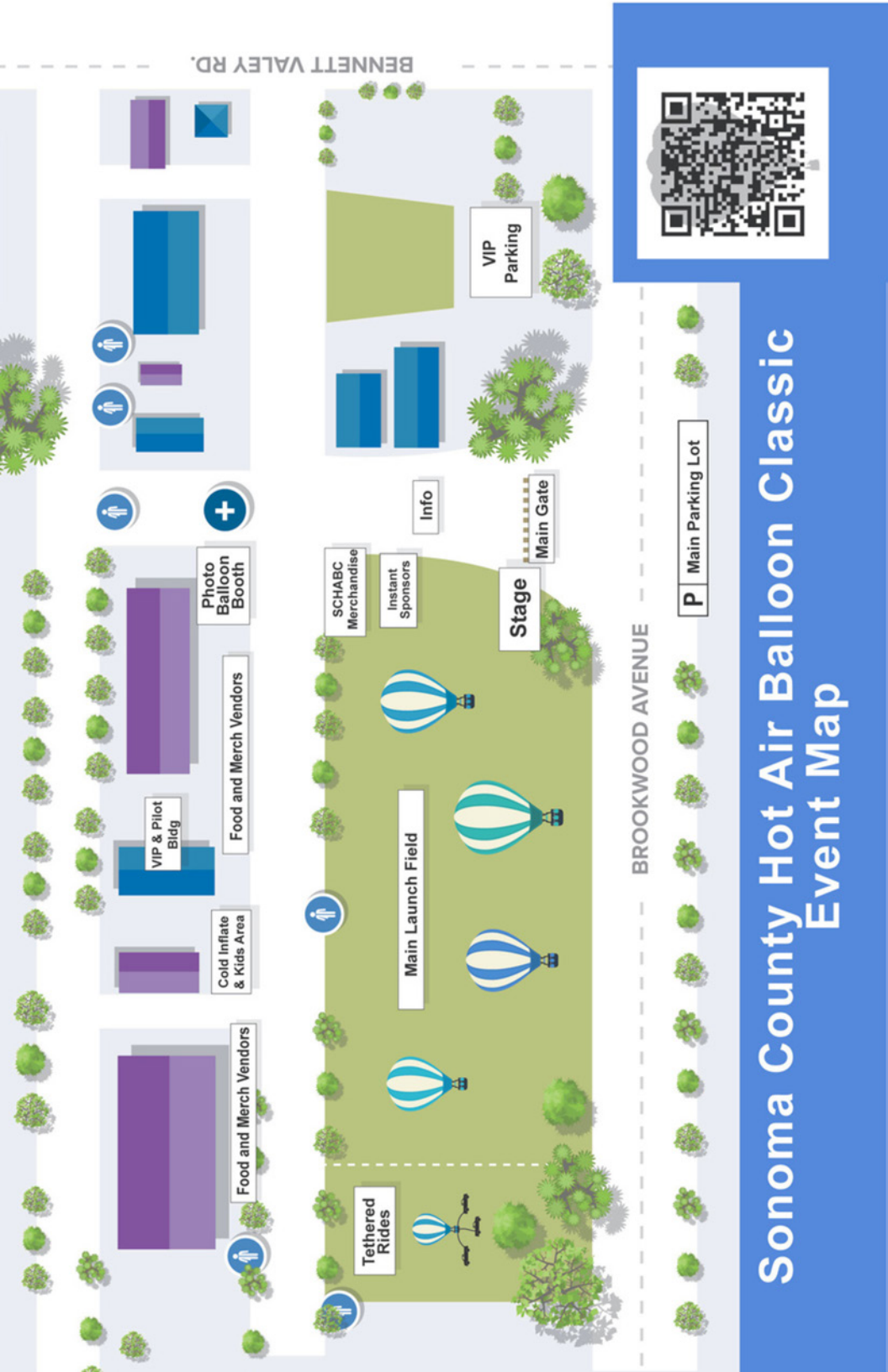
Steve and Justin Wilkinson are a father-son team behind Fantasy Balloon Flights, a family business founded in 1981. Based in Palm Springs, they offer scenic flights in the winter and travel to festivals year-round. Steve, a two-time GRBR and GTBR champion, flies Cathedral City, while Justin pilots Cosmic Crisp. Together, they continue a proud family tradition of ballooning.

THANK YOU TO OUR SPONSORS



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Sonoma County Hot Air Balloon Classic Event Map