



# **Sonoma County Hot Air Balloon Classic**

*July 18th and 19th, 2026*

## SCHEDULE OF EVENTS



**4:00 AM GATES OPEN**  
**VENDORS OPEN**

**5:00 AM DAWN PATROL**

**6:00 AM TETHERED RIDES**  
**FUN ZONE**  
**COLD INFLATE**  
**PHOTO BOOTH**

**6:30 AM MAIN LAUNCH**

### Things to Do This Morning:

- Watch the breathtaking pre-dawn balloon glow
- Fly high with a thrilling tethered balloon ride\*
- Explore inside a real hot air balloon envelope
- Shop official merchandise and commemorative posters
- Grab fresh breakfast and coffee from local food vendors
- Capture the perfect memory at the "photo balloon" booth

All times are approximate due to weather conditions \*Tether rides require an additional ticket

## EVENT OVERVIEW

On behalf of our Board of Directors and the many volunteers who make this event possible, I am delighted to welcome you to the **Sonoma County Hot Air Balloon Classic**. Thank you for joining us and supporting our nonprofit organization.

Our morning begins before dawn as crews prepare the balloons in the cool morning air for the Glow Show. One of the signature moments of our festival, the Glow Show features balloons illuminated in time with music before sunrise, highlighting the beauty and craftsmanship of their colorful canopies.

Throughout the morning, our announcers will share music, stories, and fascinating information about the world of hot air ballooning. At the same time, pilots will meet with the Federal Aviation Administration to review weather conditions, air traffic, and winds aloft. You may also see a small balloon, known as a pi-ball, released into the air. This simple but essential tool helps pilots observe wind direction and speed at different altitudes, providing valuable information before takeoff.

Once conditions are approved for flight, crews will begin preparing the balloons for launch. This is an exciting opportunity to watch the teamwork that goes into every successful flight. Each balloon is supported by a dedicated volunteer crew working under the direction of the pilot. For everyone's safety, please give the crews plenty of room to work and keep children nearby. If what you see inspires you, we are always looking for volunteers to help make future festivals possible.

Shortly afterward, our Launch Director and launch team will coordinate the release of the remaining balloons. As they rise into the sky, you will witness the graceful dance of balloon flight. By changing altitude, pilots are able to find winds traveling in different directions, allowing the balloons to navigate using nature itself. Depending on the weather, some balloons may return to the launch field, while others will land at a different location, where their chase crews will retrieve them and return them to the festival.

If you would like to experience ballooning for yourself, tethered balloon rides will be available near the end of the main launch field. Please refer to the festival map on the back of this program for the location. These rides offer a wonderful introduction to the experience of floating beneath a hot air balloon.

As beautiful as ballooning is, it is also completely dependent on the weather. Our pilots are highly trained professionals, but safety always comes first. The decision to fly rests with the pilots, based on weather conditions and Federal Aviation Administration guidance. We appreciate your understanding and hope Mother Nature provides us with calm winds and beautiful skies.

Finally, I would like to express my sincere gratitude to our Board of Directors, committee members, volunteers, sponsors, pilots, crews, vendors, public safety partners, and everyone who has contributed countless hours to making this festival possible. Their passion, dedication, and generosity have created an event that brings our community together while remaining affordable and accessible for families.

Thank you for being part of the Sonoma County Hot Air Balloon Classic. We hope you create wonderful memories, enjoy the beauty of ballooning, and return year after year. If you would like to support our nonprofit or become involved in planning future events, please visit the Information Booth or email us at [info@schabc.org](mailto:info@schabc.org).

**MIKE KIJAK**



**SONOMA STAR**



(Santa Rosa, Ca) Mike began ballooning in 1993, eventually launching Up & Away Ballooning in Sonoma County, CA, with his wife, Patty, in 1999. Together, they grew the business to three balloons, which proudly featured the only wheelchair-accessible balloon basket in the United States. After selling the company in 2015 and enjoying a brief "retirement" in Bend, Oregon, Mike is back in Sonoma County to be close to his grandkids and flying locally.

**KATIE GRIGGS**



**WINDROSE**

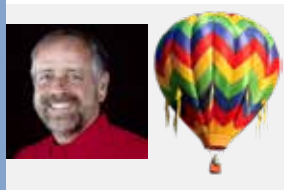


(Reno, NV) A commercial pilot with 28 years of experience, Katie is deeply committed to promoting the sport through safety and education. she has operated an FAA-certified repair station for over a decade. A prominent community leader, she served as Western Regional Director for the Balloon Federation of America (BFA) and spent years with the Great Reno Balloon Race

**DANA THORNTON**



**FREE SPIRIT**



A commercial balloonist since 1980 with over 1,900 lighter-than-air hours, Dana is a BFA Level 6 Master Aeronaut who also holds a fixed-wing pilot's license. Renowned as a "Dawn Patrol" pioneer, he has flown before sunrise at the Great Reno Balloon Race every year since 1984. Dana's adventurous career includes five flights above 18,000 feet and multiple crossings of the Diablo Mountain Range. Affectionately nicknamed "Boomerang" by his crew for his knack for navigating right back to his launch site, he proudly flies his signature "Free Spirit" balloon.

**GAY JAMES**



**WANDERER**



(Orland, CA) Hooked on aviation since her first crew experience in 1978, Gay has logged over 2,300 flight hours across nine states and France, where she famously flew a one-person "chair" balloon during the country's Bi-Centennial Celebration. A seasoned instructor and safety presenter, she spent decades flying commercially in the Napa Valley and even placed 22nd out of 1,000 competing pilots at the 25th Anniversary of the Albuquerque International Balloon Fiesta. Today, Gay flies "fun flights" and attends rallies nationwide alongside her pilot husband, Russ James, as part of an incredible, multi-generational family of balloon pilots.

**JUSTIN WILKENSON**



**YODA**



(Palm Springs, Ca) Justin is a 2nd generation hot air balloon pilot from La Quinta. When he is not flying for his family's business, Fantasy Balloon Flights, he enjoys traveling to balloon events around the world with his wife & three kids

**DAVID DUNRUD**



**SERENDIPITY**



(Geyserville, CA) Introduced to ballooning as a toddler, David Dunrud Jr. began crewing and earned his student certificate at 14. Today, he is a seasoned commercial pilot with over 1,000 flights under his belt and has attended every single Sonoma County Hot Air Balloon Classic. David loves sharing the magic of flight to create lifelong memories for his passengers. On the ground, he continues to serve his community working in airport operations and fire rescue as a Firefighter EMT at the Sonoma County Airport.

**EMILY ECKERMAN**



**RAVEN**



(Napa, Ca) A dedicated commercial hot air balloon pilot, Emily Eckerman is currently building up her command flight hours by flying alongside the experienced team at Napa Valley Aloft. With her sights set on a rewarding career as a professional passenger ride pilot, she brings a wealth of enthusiasm and skill to every launch. Beyond the controls, Emily is deeply passionate about the sport and loves being an active, hands-on part of the tight-knit hot air ballooning community, welcoming both seasoned aeronauts and first-time flyers alike.

**AARON DIERINGER**



**SUSHI**



(Prescott, Az) Aaron has had a passion for aviation for most of his life first pursuing a career in commercial aviation flying fixed wing aircraft before becoming a balloon pilot. As a balloon pilot Aaron has flown at many balloon events and even serves as the launch commander for the Great Reno Balloon Races. Some of his favorite flights include his time flying over Lake Tahoe as a commercial balloon pilot and launching off the field at the Albuquerque Balloon Fiesta with over 500 other balloons. He is excited to be participating at the Sonoma County Hot Air Balloon Classic in the special shape balloon "Sushi".

**JACOB MOLNAR**



**PRISM**



(Vacaville, Ca) A commercial hot air balloon pilot with 14 years of experience and over 3,200 flight hours, Jacob was literally raised in the sky, taking his first flight at just six months old. He successfully turned that lifelong passion into a stellar career, traveling to vibrant balloon festivals and sharing unforgettable, breathtaking flights with eager passengers nationwide.

**JAYSON KIMBAL**



**MONTGOLFIER**



(Napa, Ca) One of the friendly faces behind your balloon adventure, Jayson Kimball has clocked over 3,000 hours of balloon time and possesses a true love for the skies. He is completely dedicated to making every flight smooth, safe, and entirely unforgettable. Whether he is prepping balloons at sunrise or sharing stories mid-flight, Jayson is a major reason guests leave smiling (and floating a little).

**JEFF SPEAR**



**BLUE STAR GAS**



(Sonoma, Ca) An FAA-licensed commercial pilot for Sonoma Ballooning, Jeff Spear brings a wealth of specialized knowledge to the skies with an exceptional understanding of weather conditions and topography. His diverse background includes serving in the U.S. Coast Guard, holding a pilot's license for fixed-wing airplanes, and growing up with a rich family history in aviation. Over a decade of piloting balloons, Jeff has logged nearly 2,000 successful flights and has navigated highly complex environments.

**JUSTIN KINSINGER**



**OBSDIAN LYNX**



(Santa Rosa, CA) A second-generation aviator, Justin's journey began as a child in his grandfather's balloon, sparking a passion that led him to earn his private pilot license in 2005 and his commercial license in 2012. Today, he is a trusted, seasoned pilot with over 600 hours of flight experience, known for navigating the skies with precision and grace. His love for hot air ballooning has taken him on thrilling adventures across five countries and numerous festivals throughout the United States, allowing him to witness breathtaking landscapes from a truly unique perspective.

## GARY MICHALEK



## ASSESS ALOFT



(Lafayette, CA) Gary's very first balloon ride double-functioned as his first official flight lesson. Shortly after, he famously bought his first balloon at a garage sale, kicking off a successful piloting career that has spanned over 25 years. A seasoned veteran of the skies, Gary proudly boasts that he has only flown off with the chase-truck keys in his pocket a single time.

## DAVID ROBINSON



## TIGER MOTH



(Half Moon Bay, CA) Having had the good fortune to discover ballooning early in life, David began building and flying balloons in high school, sparking a lifelong passion for the sport. His distinguished career in the skies has earned him two of aviation's highest honors: the Balloon Federation of America's Ed Yost Master Pilot Award and the Federal Aviation Administration's prestigious Wright Brothers Master Pilot Award. David's aerial adventures also inspired a deep fascination with science and education, leading him to teach mathematics and meteorology at The College of San Mateo for many years.

## BRENT ROLLAND



## IRIDIS



(Carlsbad, CA) Brent's first experience with balloons was in 1975 in Nebraska when he crewed for a local pilot. It took almost 20 years before he was able to realize his dream of owning and flying his own balloon - and since then he's flown hundreds of hours and hundreds of passengers, sharing the joy of this great sport wherever and whenever he can!"

## JIM ABLE



## KIPHAVEN



(Guerneville, CA) Jim has been piloting balloons since 2000 and has been an integral member of the Sonoma County Hot Air Balloon Classic team since 2004, regularly illuminating the early morning skies as a Dawn Patrol pilot. His early-morning expertise has also made him a staple of the Great Reno Balloon Race Dawn Patrol for the last 12 years. When he isn't floating above the clouds, Jim enjoys life on the water, currently residing on a sailboat in Alameda.

## SEAN GERRITY



## BENNET LANE

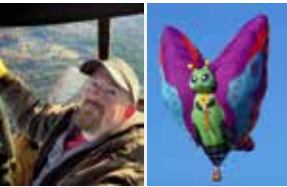


(Santa Rosa, CA) An enthusiastic balloonist who has been flying and adventuring for decades, Sean lives to share the pure joy of flight with everyone he meets. His memorable aerial exploits include dressing up as Santa Claus to fly over Sonoma County, dropping candy canes to delighted children of all ages below. Today, he channels that same community spirit and passion into owning and operating Santa Rosa Ballooning right here in northern Sonoma County.

## PATRICK SULLIVAN



## BETTIE JEAN



(Phoenix, Az) Patrick Sullivan's passion for flight began in childhood, leading him to pilot airplanes at age 20 before expanding his aviation expertise into helicopters, gas balloons, and hot air balloons. Today, he loves sharing his deep-rooted passion for the skies with his passengers, finding his greatest joy in the smiles he brings to everyone below while flying his signature balloon, "Bettie the Butterfly."

## DAVID WAKEFIELD



## REMAX



(Sacramento, CA) David, with wife Shelly, co-own Cheers Aerial Media in Sacramento, Ca. He's the Northern California Re/Max balloon program operator, and president of the Pacific Coast Aeronauts. David holds a Commercial Pilot certificate and a British Balloon and Airship pilot's license. David has also worked with corporate balloon programs including United Van Lines, Bacardi Mixers, Brooks and Dunn's "High Plains Drifter," Energizer, and more.

## STEVE WILKINSON



## COSMIC CRISP



(Palm Springs, CA) Cosmic Crisp Apple Pilot Steve Wilkinson has been a full time hot air balloon pilot for over 40 years. He and his son Justin run the family balloon business Fantasy Balloon Flights in Palm Springs. Steve enjoys traveling with the Cosmic Crisp Apple balloon across the US and world.

**DOMINIC CHEMELLO**



**THE DON**



(Reno, Nv) A veteran aviator with 50 years in ballooning and 12,000 total flight hours, Dominic flies everything from jumbo jets and helicopters to gliders and hot air balloons. Beyond his extensive piloting career, he spent 30 years serving as an FAA Aviation Safety Inspector. In that role, he worked to ensure safety across the aviation industry by investigating accidents, enforcing federal regulations, and certifying pilots, flight schools, and commercial airlines.

**MICHAEL VARGAS**



**MR BLUE SKY**



(Guerneville, Ca) Formally educated in aeronautical sciences at San Jose State University, Michael already held a commercial fixed-wing pilot's license when he decided to expand his horizons into hot air ballooning. When he isn't navigating the skies, he balances a busy and rewarding life on the ground as a full-time dad to four teenagers. Professionally, Michael also works within the medical industry, where he utilizes his technical expertise to maintain critical patient monitoring equipment for local hospitals.

**RUSS JAMES**



**HOPPER**



(Orland, Ca) Russ James shares a deep-rooted passion for the skies with his wife and fellow pilot, Gay. Together, they have spent decades navigating the ballooning community, flying commercially in the Napa Valley before relocating to Orland, California. Today, Russ continues to take to the skies for "fun flights" and travels to various balloon rallies across the country, celebrating a lifetime dedicated to the art and joy of lighter-than-air aviation.

**PATRICK WATKINS**



**VIRIDIAN**



(Napa, Ca)

## ANNOUNCER: MICHELLE MARQUES



A radio host and content producer at KRCB 104.9FM, Sonoma County's NPR station, Michelle Marques writes and produces the weekly program *The 707* and hosts the Connections music program on Thursday evenings. Her deep love for hot air balloons extends behind the scenes, where she has helped organize this very event in past years. Michelle will never forget her inaugural flight in the balloon Panda, which she shared with an unforgettable passenger—a black lab named Bear. Also a talented illustrator, Michelle published her first children's book, *What Makes You Smile As Big As The Moon?*, in 2020.

## FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

### Q: Is smoking allowed

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

### Q: May I used my drone at the event?

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

### Q: May I take photos?

A: 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:

#SCHABC

Facebook: /SonomaCountyBalloons

Twitter: /SonomaBalloons

Instagram: #SCHABC

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

A: 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:

- 1. 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 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
- 2. 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.

### Q: May I go out on the launch field?

A: 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.

THANK YOU TO OUR SPONSORS



VERTEX



VJB CELLARS



THANK YOU TO:



Derrick Ng, and all our volunteers who allow us to have a fun and affordable festival. A special thank you to all of you for joining us this morning, whether you are returning for your 15th event or joining us for the first time.

Contact: [info@schabc.org](mailto:info@schabc.org)



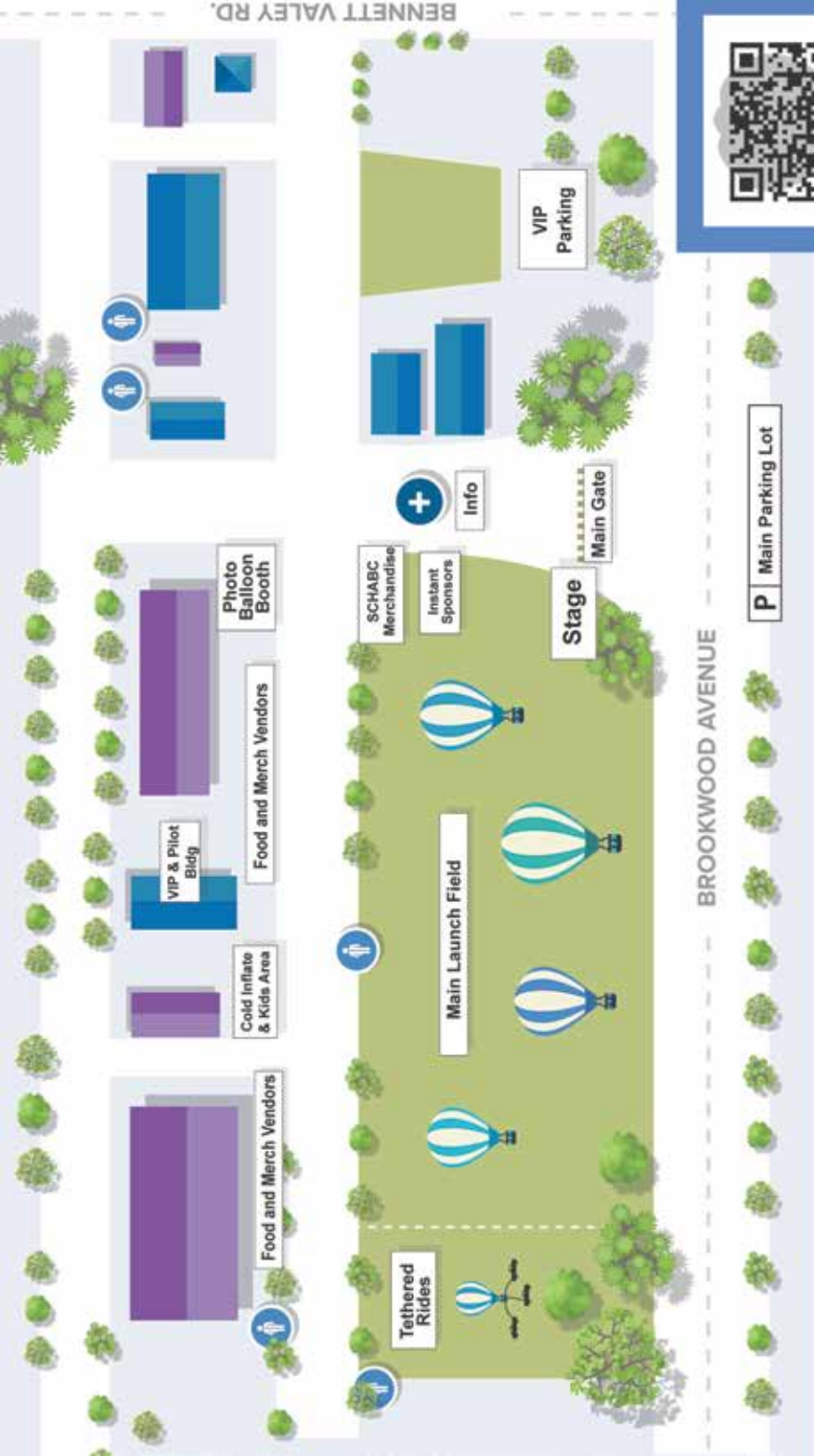
**Intrepid Enterprises**



**KORBEL**  
CALIFORNIA CHAMPAGNE



**SMART TOURS**



BENNETT VALEY RD.



# Sonoma County Hot Air Balloon Classic Event Map