

What Can I Do To Prepare Myself To Fly A Wingsuit?

Wingsuiting, once an obscure discipline, is increasing in popularity almost exponentially. New skydivers are showing an interest and asking "What can I do to prepare myself to fly a wingsuit"?

As a new bird myself, I can easily recollect the points in my past that have helped me tremendously, and the places I should have spent more time that would have made my journey much easier.

The items I've listed below are real. There's no embellishment to appease the safety crowd, or repeated mantras for the simple sake of repeating them. What I have written is what I have experienced personally, and have learned through others.

Some of the bullets have saved my life more than once. If you're a "natural", and believe your skills and bravery will allow you to cut corners, well...May God Bless you, because your wingsuit won't.

- Learn to fly and land your canopy well. Make certain you are skilled in accuracy and landing in tight spots. Your odds of landing off in the beginning will increase. Your odds of landing off will increase again after you discover cloud flying. Hone your skills by taking a canopy course. Not if, and, or but. Do it.
- Don't be in a rush to down-size. If your heroes are the guys and girls skimming the pond, and you just can't wait to buy that high performance canopy, you had better save enough money for two; a sensible, easy opening canopy for when you wingsuit, and the rocket for the pond. When you talk to a wingsuit instructor, one of their first questions is going to be, "What type of canopy do you have"?
- Learn how to spot and how winds aloft effect your flight. You'll cover a lot of ground very quickly in a wingsuit. You'll still need to make it back under canopy after you open. It's not just about getting spotting signed off on your "A" card. Know before you leave the ground where you want to open in a best case scenario. Expand that place to include the fringes of where you

know you should be ok. Take into account the safety aspects of everyone else on the plane going for that good spot of sky too. Be prepared with a plan "B" if jump run changes. Don't be afraid to ask the pilot for corrections if it doesn't look good. Be that new jumper on the DZ who knows the speed, and wind directions from the top to the bottom.

- Pay attention to everyone on the plane and learn what they are flying. Know who has big floaty canopies, and what altitude everyone is supposedly opening at. Keep in mind that you may be doing everything perfect and by the book, but there's a good chance that someone else on the load isn't. Ask questions and find out what each jumper on the plane is planning to do.
- Spend a lot of time learning to fly formations with other people, diving down to them, flying relative, and comfortable, turning points, etc. These skills will serve you well when learning to flock.
- Become good at tracking. Let your body feel the little changes you can make that cause you to fly faster, slower, smoother, and farther. After you become comfortable, track with someone experienced and learn the dangers of high speed close proximity horizontal flight.
- Pay close attention to how the relative wind affects your exits. Be comfortable recovering when you're tossed around like a piece of paper in the wind. Recovery should be second nature and not something you have to concentrate on at the moment. *Feel the hill.* Learn how to turn on it while remaining stable. When you begin wingsuiting, you'll find yourself in every unstable position known to man.
- Study and practice your emergency procedures. This mantra is impressed upon you all of the time and it's for a reason; to save your life. Train until you can perform your EP's in your sleep. Make your decision altitude a hard fast rule. *Things can get out of control very quickly in a wingsuit emergency.* The natural responses you make with your body can turn you into a flailing mass of limbs and material in less than a heart-beat. Don't just know what to do, have the confidence and training to do it without wasting precious seconds.

- A big difference between anvil jumping and wingsuiting is your odds of experiencing "in flight" emergencies are much greater with several square feet of inflatable material attached to your body. Talk to other wingsuiters about 7000' flat spins on your back, zippers breaking, potential aircraft tail strikes, pilot chutes bouncing around in the large burble your wings create, how fast you can flip over at pull time by making one small mistake, reaching back and not being able to find your hackey, instant line twists, and the complications that are added even after you're under canopy. You, without a doubt will experience some of the above emergencies if you decide to fly a wingsuit. To put it into proper perspective, I know two very experienced skydivers who stopped wingsuiting. Each experienced some of the above malfunctions and decided the risk wasn't worth the reward. One is a first jump course instructor; the other is an instructor examiner who teaches experienced skydivers to be instructors. Emphasis on KNOW AND PRACTICE YOUR EMERGENCY PROCEDURES.
- Become intimate with your gear. Spend time with your Rigger and learn how to maintain your rig properly. Keep your three-ring, cut-away, and reserve deployment system maintained and in top shape. Know what each component is for, and how it operates. Perform a gear check before every jump. The one time you forget is going to be the one time that you shouldn't have.
- Purchase a good audible altimeter, and a visual altimeter that can be mounted on your chest. If you want to wear one on your arm, get one that mounts on your hand, you won't be able to move your arm to see it with wings on.
- From the time you exit, until the time you land, stay out of your head. If you have to meditate, do it before you jump, not in the air. Look around and know what's below you, above you, and on each side, stay in the here and now, even when you get unstable.
- Hang with the birds. Listen to the stories, and read everything you can about wingsuits. Ask questions. Research the suits and manufacturers, and seek out the wingsuit instructors. There's a wealth of knowledge in the community, and a lot of good people willing to share it if you ask.

- Go slow. There's a reason for requiring a minimum number of jumps before squeezing into that wingsuit. It's not just about successfully completing steps and mile markers; it's about a mind-set that takes time. You'll find yourself going through psychological changes as you progress; changes you can only acquire through time in the air. Some drop zones and jumpers frown on our discipline. They profess that we are unsafe, hotdogs, crazy, etc. It's your responsibility to prove them wrong. The best way, and only way to accomplish this is to become a proficient and safe skydiver before you ever grow your wings.

With about 100 wingsuit jumps I'm still very much in the infancy stage of learning to fly. Is wingsuiting easy? Perhaps for some, but I believe that it depends on what your goals are, and how willing you are to properly prepare before truly experiencing flight. It's going to take me personally a lot longer to master flying my suit, but every second I spend with those wings on is an awesome experience, every second a step closer to being a pilot, not just a passenger.

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