WYOMING
NASA Space Grant Consortium

HIGH-ALTITUDE BALLOON NEWSLETTER

ISSUE 4 ▪ SPRING 2026

Hello and welcome to the Spring 2026 issue of our annual High-Altitude Balloon Newsletter! This past year, we brought our balloon launch operations to five different locations across the state, including new locations in Green River and Glenrock. We also made return visits to schools in Laramie, Shoshoni, and Cody. Like always, this issue will include highlights and photos from each of these events, as well as an important bit of news about our program.

If you have questions about our program or would like to reach us, please use the contact information provided at the bottom of the last page of the newsletter. Enjoy!

– Wyoming Space Grant Staff

BALLOONING BY THE NUMBERS

(As of May 2026)

Total balloon flights: 92
Launch observers: ~8,400
Direct participants: ~2,500
K-12 student participants: ~2,100
Average burst altitude: 93,216 ft
Highest burst altitude: 107,373 ft
Average flight distance: 51.9 miles
Longest flight distance: 122.2 miles

UPDATES & ANNOUNCEMENTS

Bergmaier Leaving Space Grant

Phil Bergmaier, our balloon program director since 2014, will be leaving his position at the Wyoming Space Grant following the conclusion of the University of Wyoming's spring 2026 semester. He started launching balloons with us as a graduate fellow while pursuing a PhD in atmospheric science. After completing his PhD, Phil joined Space Grant full-time in 2019. As he prepares to depart, Phil would like to share the following message:

"After nearly 12 wonderful years of leading the Wyoming Space Grant's high-altitude balloon program at UW, I have made the tough decision to leave this role at the university to pursue other career opportunities and interests elsewhere, effective June 1.

"During these last 12 years, I've been fortunate enough to help fly more than 90 high-altitude balloons across Wyoming, about 60 of which were with K-12 educational groups (schools, afterschool programs, and summer camps). I am so grateful to Space Grant, NASA, and UW for allowing me the opportunity to be a part of these unique and exciting experiences.

"I also want to thank those of you who have supported and participated in our balloon

program over the years, especially the teachers. It's been inspiring to see the impact that a simple balloon flight can have on students, and none of this would have been possible without your involvement. I'm hopeful that Space Grant will be able to keep the balloon program going so that it can continue to have an impact on students for many years to come."

Flight Opportunities for 2026–2027

The Wyoming Space Grant has not yet found a successor to take over high-altitude balloon program operations following Phil's departure this summer. Therefore, we are not currently accepting new balloon launch requests for the 2026–27 academic year. If this changes, we will likely post an update/announcement on our website, or on our social media pages. If you are interested in hosting a balloon launch next year, be sure to periodically check those spaces for more information.

BALLOON LAUNCH HIGHLIGHTS

We conducted a total of six high-altitude balloon flights during the 2025–2026 school year, two in the fall and four this spring. Coming into the year, less than 20% of our launches had been with elementary schools. This year, we launched with *five* elementary school groups, accounting for 1/3 of all the elementary school events we've done since 2014. Every year is unique! Anyway, check out the highlights from each of these events below.

Linford Elementary School (Laramie)

Our first launch of the school year was at Linford Elementary School in Laramie in early October. This was a full-circle moment because Linford was the first school we ever launched with way back in 2014. Back then, we actually launched two balloons on the same day, just hours apart, a decision that was perhaps a bit ill-

advised given our inexperience. This time, however, we flew only one balloon.

As usual, the students developed their own payloads and attempted to follow the scientific method by comparing the test items in their payloads with matching control items that stayed on the ground during the flight. The flight itself went really well, lasting a little under two hours with a burst altitude of 96,833 ft above sea level. The launch took place just as a shallow layer of thick morning fog was beginning to dissipate, which looked really cool on the video from our onboard cameras.

After burst, the payload quickly descended and landed on private ranch property near the small community of Federal, WY, about 15 miles northwest of Cheyenne and only 26 miles from our launch site. The landowner kindly granted us permission to walk on and retrieve the payload, which was laying in an open field about 1/2 mile from a nearby public road.

Highlight Video / Flight Tracker

Shoshoni School (Shoshoni)

One of the more memorable launch events of the year occurred in mid-November at Shoshoni school in the small town of Shoshoni. The participants developing the payloads were once again elementary students, and oh boy were they in for a treat. After a relatively normal launch, the balloon ascended to a burst altitude of a little over 94,000 ft. During this time, we hit the road and headed eastward to chase the balloon toward the Lysite/Lost Cabin area. A bus carrying about 20 of the elementary students joined us for the chase, following close behind.

We made it to Lysite before the balloon had burst and pulled off the road at the corner store in the center of town. From the parking lot, we looked up and, after a bit of searching, there it was! We found the balloon, a tiny white dot in a blue sea of open sky. For the next 15 minutes, we watched with great anticipation as the balloon hovered almost 17 miles directly above our heads. Then, suddenly, it was gone! We had seen the balloon burst with our naked eyes! Although we Space Grant folks have seen the balloon from the ground many times, it's always a joy to observe the reactions of others when they witness it for the first time.

The payload eventually landed on the BLM about 10 miles east of Lost Cabin, and 34 miles from Shoshoni, on a hilly, elevated terrain feature called Cedar Ridge. We drove our vehicles (bus included!) up a BLM two-track to the base of the hills until the road condition deteriorated and driving no longer made sense. From there, we hiked the rest of the way into the hills, about 3 miles roundtrip. The kids (most of them, at least) absolutely loved it! When we arrived at the landing site, we found the payload boxes draped safely over a set of small bushes. The surrounding views from there were quite good. After the students took a few minutes to analyze the state of their payloads, we packed

everything up and headed back to the vehicles. What a unique experience that I'm sure the students won't soon forget!

Highlight Video / Flight Tracker

Wyoming Connections Academy (Glenrock)

To begin our slate of spring launches, we traveled to Glenrock in early February. The host for this launch was Wyoming Connections Academy, an online K-12 school with students from across the state. Unlike February 2025, when we launched a balloon from Sheridan in snowy 0°F conditions, the weather for this launch event was unseasonably warm, with high temperatures in the 60s and calm winds.

Joined by a nice group of onlookers, including students and members of the local community, we launched the balloon from the Glenrock Fire Hall. This was our first launch using our new 8K 360° camera, and the corresponding video footage during the flight was, as expected, breathtaking. The balloon popped 86 minutes

after launch at an altitude of just over 90,000 ft. Following a speedy descent, the payload was back on the ground about 22 minutes later, landing on private property along the outskirts of Douglas, just 29 miles from our launch site.

Highlight Video / Flight Tracker

Eastside Elementary School (Cody)

For the second year in a row, we returned to Eastside Elementary School in Cody for a March balloon launch with a bunch of third graders. With a full payload pushing our 12-pound limit, we launched the balloon right as the morning wind was beginning the pick up. With an otherwise beautiful day on tap, we tracked the balloon southeastward across the extensive Bighorn Basin toward the looming Big Horn Mountains. Although our flight predictions had indicated that the payload would likely land short (i.e., west) of the mountains, north of the town of Ten Sleep, we weren't so sure after noticing that the payload was ascending at a slower rate than expected.

Thankfully, the payload took a last-minute westward turn just prior to burst, providing a little little more breathing room to avoid the mountains during the descent. At an altitude of just over 91,000 ft, the balloon finally popped and the payload fell back to Earth, landing on the BLM about 83 miles from Cody and within just a few miles of its predicted landing spot. The total flight time was 1 hour 52 minutes.

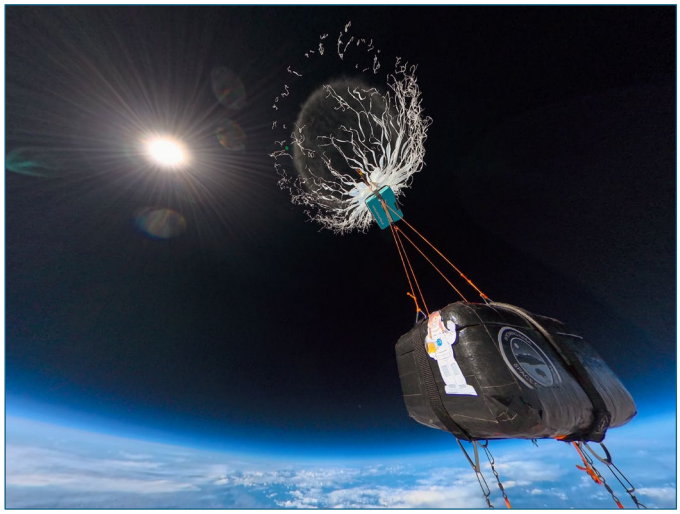
Following the event, we released two highlight videos, including our second full-length 360° VR video of the entire flight. Our first such video, released last year after a flight in Dubois, went viral and currently has over 1.5 million views on YouTube! We're hoping that this one, recorded in glorious 8K resolution, does even better.

Highlight Video / 360 Video / Flight Tracker

Indian Paintbrush Elementary (Laramie)

In early April, we revisited Indian Paintbrush Elementary School in Laramie for the first time since 2021. A feisty group of first graders were the lucky ones who got to build payloads for this flight. We once again had amazing weather for the launch, which seemed to be a theme this year. It turns out that our payload also had a stowaway onboard. Oh wait, never mind, that's just Astronaut Alessandra, an educational project started by the Washington Space Grant that is based on the popular Flat Stanley Project.

We followed the balloon eastward, expecting it to eventually land just across the state line in Nebraska. About 74 minutes into flight, the balloon popped at an altitude of 90,716 ft, a bit lower than we had hoped. As a result, the payload did not travel quite as far during the descent, landing in Wyoming on a small ranch



only eight miles northwest of the border town of Pine Bluffs, 74 miles from Laramie. The final flight time came in at 1 hour 43 minutes.

Once on the ground, the wind caught hold of the parachute and dragged the payload several hundred yards across a cow pasture and nearly into a wire fence. Brian, the friendly ranch owner, happened to be out in his fields at that time and was thankfully able to grab the parachute before any damage could be done. When we arrived at his house to inquire about the payload, he played coy with us for a brief moment before kindly revealing that he had it waiting for us in his truck. He didn't seem annoyed, although he was certainly quite curious about the payload. After explaining everything and showing him a few photos from the launch, we parted ways and hit the road back to Laramie.

Highlight Video / Flight Tracker

Truman Elementary School (Green River)

The final balloon launch of the school year took place in early May at Truman Elementary School in Green River. Amazingly, this was our very first time launching a balloon in the Green River or Rock Springs area! Not to sound like a broken record, but the weather on launch day was fabulous once again—warm, dry, and relatively calm. The only downside is that it was somewhat cloudy, which prevented the onboard cameras from capturing stunning views of the nearby Uinta Mountains in Utah. The students developed some cool payloads and included a few items that we may have never flown before (a freezer pop, stress ball, and even a donut).

Most of the school came out for the launch, which went off without a hitch. The balloon

drifted southeastward and eventually burst at 96,109 ft, about 95 minutes into the flight. We had our largest parachute onboard, so the payload gradually coasted back down to Earth over the next 35 minutes, landing along the side slope of a moderately steep draw on the BLM in far northwest Colorado.

Although it landed just 69 miles from the launch site, we had to drive almost 100 miles to get there. It was a pleasant ride across some of the most rural, barren country you'll find in the Rocky Mountain West. Thanks to a favorable network of unpaved county roads and BLM two-tracks, we were able to get the vehicle to within 1/2 mile of the landing site. A short hike later and the payload was back in our possession.

Highlight Video / Flight Tracker

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