

PD back up in the air



Sergeant Steve Merchant of the Ripon Police Department lifts off in the department's powered parachute Thursday morning at Mistlin Sports Park. Craig Macho/The Ripon Record

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Springtime in Ripon brings flowers, nice weather, the sound of children playing in parks, and nervous overhead glances by bad guys.

With the improving weather, the police department is back up in the air looking far and wide for those who would break the law.

Ripon Police Sergeant Steve Merchant is one of the department's pilots, and he said with the clearing weather air patrols will continue through the summer months. The police department utilizes air patrols for burglary suppression, drug investigations, and to support the department's patrol efforts, as well as specialized missions such as missing person cases, river rescues, suspect captures, aerial crime scene photography, major event security over flights, gang and graffiti suppression, and auto theft suppression, among other uses.

In May of 2009, the Ripon Police Department was the

first law enforcement agency in the state to implement a designated aviation unit utilizing a powered parachute. The Ripon Police Department was also one of the first departments in the United States to utilize this low cost aviation asset.

According to the department, the powered parachute is extremely economical to operate. When fuel, maintenance, storage, and additional costs are added up, a helicopter is commonly thought to cost approximately \$1,500 an hour to operate. The powered parachute costs approximately \$30 an hour to operate. The aircraft does not need a traditional runway, and there is no need for a traditional aircraft hangar. The aircraft can easily be towed to a desired location, and it can be deployed and flown by one officer/pilot. A second officer can be added onboard to act as a Tactical Flight Officer.

Merchant is one of two officers who have been trained to pilot the powered parachute.