

# Snake River BASE Academy

*Higher Education for Lower Freefall*

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## Getting Into BASE

*By Tom Aiello*

Virtually every time I tell someone that I'm a BASE jumper, their first question is "how could I get into that?" After answering that question dozens of times, I decided to write it all down

There are as many different ways of getting started BASE jumping as there are jumpers. But, after some soul-searching, some discussion with friends, and some internet research, I've decided that the course I wish I had followed, and the one I've tried to set people on, goes something like this.

## Check the Fit

BASE jumping is *not for everyone*. Give yourself a long hard, look, and decide if BASE really fits you. It's virtually impossible to objectively evaluate yourself, so it might be helpful to have a (close and tactful) friend help you with this step.

Does BASE jumping fit your physical abilities? BASE is not really about personal fitness (although it helps) or athleticism (which only comes into play in advanced sub-disciplines). In BASE, the important physical abilities are reaction time, coordination and balance. Evaluate yours. It may be helpful to ask some of the following questions: If you are sitting at a desk, and knock a pencil off, do you pick it up off the ground, or did you catch it in mid-air? When you spill a bottle of beer, do you have to get up and get a new one, or do you right it before you've lost most of it? Are you clumsy at all, or are you constantly sure-footed and graceful? How comfortable are you with heights?

Does BASE jumping fit your mindset? The best BASE jumpers are organized to the point of anal retentive. They also have an intellectual curiosity about almost everything. Have you ever wondered how the reserve system on a skydiving rig works? How many times did you trust your life to it before you starting wondering? Are you always trying to find a pull-up cord to close, or do other people ask you for them?

Do you make correct decisions in pressure situations? BASE jumpers need to react quickly, and *correctly*, in life threatening situations. Have you ever been confronted with an oncoming car in your lane? How did you react? Did you have to think about it, or did it just happen for you?

BASE will best fit a person who is intellectually curious, has good reactions, responds quickly and correctly (without having to think *during* the emergency), has excellent coordination and is highly organized and detail oriented. You can definitely still be a BASE jumper who has trouble with one or two of these things, but if you are weak in most of these areas, BASE is not a good sport to take up.

## Make the Decision

Make absolutely certain BASE is really what you want. This sport is dangerous, sometimes illegal and very addictive. It will take over your life. I would never advise someone to get into it (and I have found it to be the most rewarding experience of my life). In my short time in this sport I've seen three life flight helicopters from the outside,

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two more from the inside, the back of two different police cars, several broken bones and the funeral of a good friend. I've also spent three weeks in Intensive Care and 18 hours in neurosurgery. Are you sure you really want to do this?

There are lots of different reasons to get into BASE, and I have given up trying to decide which are the "right" ones. The important thing is that your reasons are important enough to you to outweigh the potentially enormous costs of BASE jumping. Unless you are a race car driver, BASE is probably the most dangerous thing you will ever do. Any time you gather 20 experienced, active BASE jumpers together, one of them will probably die BASE jumping at some point in the future. Further, BASE jumpers are virtually guaranteed some serious injury (think hospital time) from the sport. There are very few BASE jumpers with more than 500 jumps who have not spent serious time (more than a day or two) in the hospital due to BASE accidents. Most agree that it is just a matter of time until they are seriously injured. If you are not ready to die BASE jumping, you are not ready to go BASE jumping.

But the greatest cost of BASE jumping is not your own life. In this sport, you will meet, and come to care for, some of the most amazing people in the world. Then they will die. Everyone who BASE jumps for any length of time will lose a close friend. Think about the ten people who are closest to you in the world. Imagine how it would feel to lose one of them every year. This is the kind of price you must be prepared to pay.

Go to this web site: <http://www.basefatalities.info>. Read the entire thing. Seriously.

Still want to be a BASE jumper? Then read on...

## Do Your Homework

Next you need to find out *everything* that you can about BASE jumping. Talk to every BASE jumper you can. Read every article you can find about BASE, rigging or weather. Get on the internet and find everything you can about BASE (there is a whole lot more than you'd think). I have included several of my favorite references at the end of this article, but there are many, many more.

## Get Your Head Straight

Now that you've made the decision to jump, make sure that you have the right mentality. There are two important pieces to that mentality that will help keep you alive in this sport.

**Never do anything that doesn't feel right to you.** If you're not ready for something, don't do it. We all determine our own learning speeds, and there is no way to know in advance what you'll be comfortable with. Don't be pushed into doing things you're not ready for by overeager partners or teachers.

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**Never be afraid to back down.** It takes far more courage to walk away from the exit point than to jump. There are definitely times when it is right to back off, and knowing when to heed that little voice in your head is critical to your survival. This sport is very, very serious, and taking it lightly will hurt, maim, or kill you in short order.

The rest of your mentality you'll develop as you go, learning from other jumpers, from experience (both positive and negative) and from the rest of your life.

## Tell Your Family

It is the responsibility of every BASE jumper to tell their family that they are involved in BASE, that they understand the risks, and that they have chosen to take those risks.

Sit down with your family and talk to them about BASE. This is obviously an extremely difficult proposition. Facing your family with your decision to engage in a life-threatening activity cannot be easy. However this discussion is important both for you and for the sport of BASE jumping.

An honest, open discussion with your loved ones will make them feel more included in your decisions. They will generally be more impressed with the maturity and thought that has gone into your decision to jump. This can help avoid the arguments, tantrums, and guilt trips that might otherwise be thrown at you by family and friends who don't understand your activities.

An explanation, by you, that you understand and accept the risks involved, will help prevent your family from attacking other members of the BASE community in the event of your injury or death. There have been far too many cases of the families of dead jumpers accusing, confronting, suing and even prosecuting other jumpers as a result of fatalities. Don't let this happen to your friends.

## Get Your Papers in Order

Write a letter to your friends and family, to be opened in the event that you die BASE jumping. In the letter, explain why you have chosen to take up BASE, what you hope to get from BASE jumping, and why you are willing to risk death for it. Also be certain to state that you understand the risks inherent in BASE jumping, and have made an educated decision to take those risks. Give sealed copies to (at the very least) your family and your BASE mentor. Do this to defuse any conflicts that might arise from your death.

Check your health insurance. One of the biggest arguments that non-jumpers make against BASE is that they (through state funded programs) will be stuck with costs of caring for injured jumpers. Call your insurance company and confirm that they will cover a BASE injury. If your current coverage doesn't cover parachuting, find out how to purchase an additional rider. The added cost will be more than worth it if you are injured.

Be certain that your immediate family (and especially your dependents) will be cared for in the event of your death. While it can be difficult to find life insurance that will pay out for a BASE fatality, it is not impossible. The extra cost you'll pay is extremely worthwhile. Every responsible BASE jumper should, at a minimum, carry accident and disability insurance to care for their children.

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Consider additional insurance policies. Several companies offer comprehensive liability policies that will cover you for damage to other people's property. Most even cover intentional damage, and some even cover criminal acts. Investigate purchasing a policy that covers you, and your intended jumping style. These policies are relatively inexpensive (my coverage for US \$1 million runs me around US \$100 per year). Not only will they give you peace of mind, but they will also help to show people that you (and BASE jumpers in general) are considerate of others, are willing to be responsible for the consequences of your actions, and are responsible, mature adults.

Also consider obtaining rescue insurance, to cover you in the event you require rescue after an accident. One of the biggest complaints about legal BASE voiced by citizens is expense to local search and rescue operations. With appropriate insurance coverage, these concerns can be avoided. Many outdoors organizations (such as the American Alpine Club, or the Swiss REGA) offer inexpensive policies that cover search and rescue costs for any outdoor activity (including BASE jumping).

Availability of insurance will vary greatly depending on where you live. When seeking insurance coverage, an insurance broker in your area will be a good first stop.

## Make the Skydives

First, make at least 200 skydives. You need this experience to practice accuracy, tracking and canopy control skills. You also need to establish a general comfort level with parachutes, free fall, and split second decisions. The skydivers who are best prepared for BASE generally jump large, 7 cell, F-111 canopies, have had a number of malfunctions and responded correctly, and are comfortable with multiple skydiving disciplines. If your only focus is BASE jumping, don't succumb to the temptation to become canopy swooping freeflyer. Instead, focus on CRW and Accuracy as your skydiving disciplines.

To practice tracking make entire skydives in max track. Don't count on the limited tracking on break off, or on the balanced tracking of a tracking jump. Make the whole dive tracking as hard as you can, with camera and coaching if possible, and work on getting the most lift, and the most drive out of your track.

For accuracy practice, it's best to use the canopy that you intend to BASE jump with. Try to set up low (under 500 feet), to simulate the BASE environment. Don't forget to make approaches cross- and down-wind as well, since you will often have to do this while BASE jumping.

For canopy practice, you should make some CRW jumps (on a CRW canopy) and then do some canopy drills on your intended BASE canopy. CRW is a great way to learn canopy flight characteristics in tight spaces *before* you get into the BASE environment (and CRW with your BASE canopy is an excellent drill—after you've learned some CRW skills).

Be sure you've made several night jumps during your skydiving career. In many places, BASE jumps are made almost exclusively at night (to avoid arrest, incarceration, and gear confiscation), and comfort with flying and landing your canopy at night is essential to survive these jumps.

Make some jumps on your BASE canopy to learn its performance envelope. Pay particular attention to riser input, practicing riser turns and riser flares. Make sure you

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practice your riser turns *before* popping your toggles—that's the way you'll have to do it to avoid smacking the side of a cliff one day. Obviously, you'll want to practice them after grabbing the toggles, as well. It's also important to learn to land your canopy with a rear riser flare. Be careful to practice this with a good headwind, first, and with proper coaching.

## Understand BASE Ethics

BASE jumping has its own peculiar set of ethical guidelines. Try to research and understand these (often unspoken) rules *before* you start into BASE. A thorough understanding will help to avoid misunderstandings that can haunt your entire BASE career.

The nuances of BASE ethics vary from place to place, and especially vary depending on the legal status of a site. If there are established guidelines for a site (true at an increasing number of popular sites), always find out what they are, and follow them. The guidelines have been established for good reasons, and often in conjunction with local authorities. Jumpers breaking these rules (through ignorance or otherwise) undermine the legalization efforts of the entire BASE community.

Site specific guidelines aside, there are three basic points of BASE ethics:

**Respect:** Show respect for the sport, the sites, and other jumpers. Failing to respect the serious nature of BASE will quickly alienate many experienced jumpers, who have learned to respect BASE through hard personal experiences. Failing to respect sites, and the guidelines for jumping them (formal or otherwise) will almost certainly anger the older jumpers who established, and continue to jump, those sites. Respecting other people is a basic guideline of human interaction we all learned in kindergarten. Don't forget that the basic forms of human interaction apply on the exit point, just as well as in "normal" life.

**Leave No Trace:** The old backpackers credo, "Leave only footprints, take only pictures" is even more true in BASE (except that in our case, it's more often "take only video"). Leaving evidence that you have been jumping an object is not only poor behavior from an environmental standpoint. It also lets the authorities know that BASE jumpers lack respect for the area, or (on less than legal sites) that they have been there at all. Things as small as being seen by a drunk at 3am have been used to arrest and prosecute BASE jumpers. To avoid drawing unwanted attention to yourself, other jumpers, or the objects we share, try to make jumps with no witnesses, and without leaving physical evidence. While this ethic obviously evolved in the context of illegal jumps, with land managers examining BASE in wilderness areas today, minimizing our impact there is equally important.

**Contact the Locals:** Whether you are a new jumper just getting into the sport in your area, or a more experienced jumper who is traveling, the original rule of BASE ethics still applies. Always make genuine efforts to locate jumpers local to any object you want to jump from. Not only will this help you to meet some wonderful, interesting people, but it will help to show respect for the hard work of those who opened (and maintain) site access. Further, the locals may have worked out ways to make jumps that you would have to spend years to duplicate. Local jumpers often have contacts, access, and schedules that allow jumps to be made with minimum risk or trouble.

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## Find a Mentor

While you are learning to skydive, you will doubtless meet skydivers at the drop zone. Try to find and meet the local BASE jumpers as well. Your goal should be to find someone with 200 or more BASE jumps from at least 25 different objects, who has experience evaluating and opening new sites, who you think will be a good teacher, and whom you get along with. You also have to trust them with your life (that is what you will be doing, after all).

Remember that the people you meet at the dropzone may not be the best BASE mentors. Experience (and skill) skydiving does not necessarily translate into BASE. The people who taught you to skydive may not be the right people to teach you BASE. Check out the background and credentials of a prospective mentor. There are several easy ways to do this, including calling gear manufacturers to ask if they know a jumper, talking to other BASE jumpers, and even just posting on an internet forum asking for feedback on a jumper (be certain to get permission from the jumper in question before posting their name in a public forum).

You will also want to research the BASE culture and politics in your area. In some places, local BASE communities have become polarized enough that being identified with a particular crew is sufficient to get you shunned by other locals. As a beginner, your goal should be to steer clear of those politics, and become friends with as many local jumpers as possible. While it's important to understand the root of the disagreements (and know how to avoid getting involved in them), getting along with all your local BASE jumpers is extremely beneficial, especially as you start.

## Get a BASE Rig

Now, with proper canopy skills and an instructor, you need to find a BASE rig. Your best bet is to buy a new, Velcro closed, BASE specific rig from a major manufacturer, and put a real BASE canopy in it. You can also find good used gear (check the classified ads on the BASE board: [www.blincmagazine.com](http://www.blincmagazine.com), or on Dropzone.com: [www.dropzone.com](http://www.dropzone.com)). The key is to get actual BASE specific gear. Lots of people will try to sell you converted skydiving gear (Ravens, Cruiselites, Pegasus's, etc). Avoid this and get real BASE gear. Everyone has different preferences in gear, but the key is to find actual, purpose built, BASE gear.

## Take a First Jump Course

So, now you have the pre-requisite skydiving skills, an appropriate rig, and you've found an instructor. Time to go jumping, right?

Wrong. Now it's time to get to work. Before you can make your first jump, you still have to learn basic rigging and packing, dead air exits skills, and simple ethics. Which means you need to take a First Jump Course.

First jump courses are available from various BASE organizations around the world, such as the Australian BASE Association (which maintains a database of qualified instructors in Australia) and the Norwegian BASE Association (which has classes available at Lysefjord in an attempt to minimize accidents at that popular site).

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If you have the money, your first choice should be to take your course in Twin Falls, Idaho (USA), as that “teaching object” (a 486’ bridge over water, with a huge grassy landing area) is generally the safest for a first time jumper. (As of this writing, the ABA is attempting to organize a course that would make first jumps from the bridge in the US, then return to Australia for additional mentoring. If you are in Australia, I highly recommend investigating this option.)

Lots of people try to save some money by getting their friends to “teach” them. This is a bad idea for several reasons. First, you don’t know that your friend really has the qualifications to teach. Second, you don’t know that he’s really motivated to do a thorough job teaching. Sure, he can get you off for that first jump, but what did he teach you about dealing with your unstable launch on jump number 12? Third, there is some value in being exposed to various jumpers’ knowledge after your first jump course. Since you will already have access to your friend’s knowledge, adding another source of information will greatly benefit your education. Finally, these “informal” first jump courses can drag on for weeks, months, even years. If you contract with a good organization, you know the exact dates of your course, and you can plan for it.

If you have done all of your homework, have good canopy skills, and a strong understanding of BASE, the author of this article occasionally offers free first jump courses at the legal span in the US. Admission to these courses is highly competitive, and based on a variety of factors, primarily preparation of the student. For more information, contact the author via email at the address listed at the end of this article.

After you finish your Course, try to have your BASE mentor meet you at the object where you took the First Jump Course. Make as many jumps as possible over the next few days, having your mentor critique (and film, if possible) your jumps. This will help you establish currency in a relatively safe environment, and will give you more practice than the relatively limited jumping (usually around 5 jumps) during your First Jump Course.

## Watch Some Video

Now that you have an idea of what a BASE jump ought to look like, get your hands on some BASE video. The best video for this is the “Lemmings Exits” series from Bridge Day. Unfortunately, this video is no longer sold, so you may have to search around for a copy. Try to get several years of “Lemmings Exits”, and whatever other BASE video you can find (if you have trouble finding instructional video, contact the author of this article). Watch the video, preferably with your BASE mentor. Evaluate each jump. The more errors you can see, the more likely you are to avoid making them yourself.

## Get Started

Now you’re ready to start jumping. After your First Jump Course, you should have a solid knowledge of gear, rigging and packing, some theoretical knowledge of malfunctions and solutions, and a practical set of launches to work from.

The next step is to make as many jumps (in as short a time) as possible with your BASE mentor. Ask questions constantly. Try to learn as much as you can. Once you feel comfortable (and so does your mentor), start branching out and jumping with other

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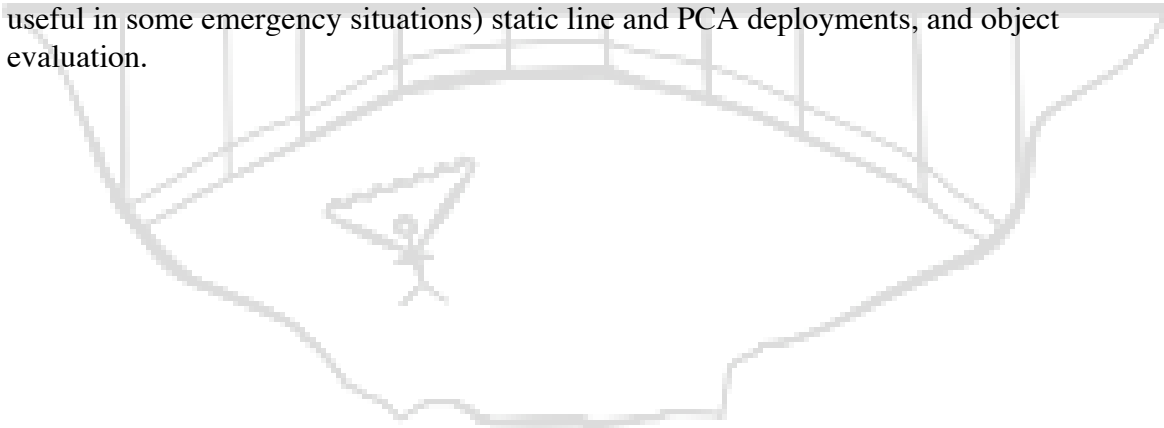
people. Ask them the same questions (they may have different answers). Watch different people pack. Watch different people jump. Always ask why things are done a certain way.

## Keep Learning and Progress Safely

Now that you have 20-30 jumps, and can hang with the local crew, you can consider yourself a solid beginner. There is still a lot more to learn, see and do. Never stop learning. In addition to being a good way to stay alive, it's one of the most rewarding things about the sport.

The next step is to start learning intermediate BASE skills in a logical order. You'll want to focus the next parts of your BASE development on learning object avoidance skills, followed closely by canopy flight and landing. Then, learn to exit running (work up from a few simple steps to a full sprint). Next, learn to exit from unusual positions, or odd balance, into a stable freefall. After that, you'll need to start learning object evaluation.

Along the way, you'll also want to learn deep brake setting, unpacked jumps (very useful in some emergency situations) static line and PCA deployments, and object evaluation.



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## Some Resources

### First Jump Courses:

#### Adrenalin

22 Chemin de Bois de la Bossenaz  
74310 Les Houches, France  
+33 (0) 4 50 54 36 18  
[adrenalin@adrenalinBASE.com](mailto:adrenalin@adrenalinBASE.com)  
<http://www.adrenalinBASE.com>

#### Apex BASE (Moab): Instruction and Events

P.O. Box 1304  
Moab, Utah 84532  
+1 435 259-1085  
[moab@apexbase.com](mailto:moab@apexbase.com)  
<http://www.apexbase.com>

#### Asylum Designs

Post Office Box 4204  
Auburn, California 95604  
+1 530 823-5222  
+1 530 823-7607 fax  
[support@asylumbase.com](mailto:support@asylumbase.com)  
<http://www.asylumbase.com>

#### BASE Euphoria

<http://www.BASEeuphoria.com/>  
[info@BASEeuphoria.com](mailto:info@BASEeuphoria.com)

#### Australian BASE Association

Livia Dickey  
[Livia.d@ozemail.com.au](mailto:Livia.d@ozemail.com.au)

#### Snake River BASE Academy

P.O. Box 2493  
Twin Falls, Idaho 83303-2493  
<http://www.SnakeRiverBASE.com>  
[info@SnakeRiverBASE.com](mailto:info@SnakeRiverBASE.com)

#### Stavanger BASE Klubb

<http://www.basekjerag.com>

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## Must See Web Sites:

- <http://www.basefatalities.info> Read every word of this web site. Seriously.  
<http://www.basejump.org> Click on the “Articles” link, and read ALL the “Must Read” articles.  
<http://www.crmojo.com> Especially look through the “Articles” section of the “Library”.

## On Line Discussion Forums:

- <http://www.dropzone.com>  
<http://www.blincmagazine.com>

## BASE Gear Manufacturer Web Sites

- <http://www.apexBASE.com>  
<http://www.AdrenalinBASE.com>  
<http://www.asylumBASE.com>  
<http://www.BASErigs.com>  
<http://www.CRmojo.com>  
<http://www.MySkyShop.com>

## Used BASE Gear Classifieds On Line

- <http://www.blincmagazine.com/forum/forumdisplay.php?f=60>  
[http://www.dropzone.com/cgi-bin/classifieds/page.cgi?g=BASE\\_Gear%2Findex.html&d=1](http://www.dropzone.com/cgi-bin/classifieds/page.cgi?g=BASE_Gear%2Findex.html&d=1)

## Other Informational BASE web sites of interest

- <http://www.vertical-visions.com>  
<http://www.bridgeday.info>  
<http://www.backcountryparachutists.org>

## Regional BASE sites and discussion

- Australia: <http://www.basejump.org>  
UK: <http://www.basejumper.net>  
Southern Norway: <http://www.BASEKjerag.com>  
France: <http://www.base-jump.com>  
Germany: <http://www.base-jump.de>

## And some inspirational web sites:

- <http://www.zerop.net/base/>  
<http://www.yosemite.org/vryos/>

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## BASE Ethics Articles:

*Ethics in a Self Regulating Group*, by Adam Filipino

*Understanding BASE Ethics*, by Tom Aiello

## BASE Progression Articles:

*Progressing in BASE*, by Dwain Weston

*Advice for Starting Wingsuit BASE Jumping*, by James Boole, et al.

*BASE Skills Progression*, by Tom Aiello

## Books:

Understanding the Sky. Dennis Pagen. Sport Aviation Publications; ISBN: 0936310103; (February 1992): Buy this book. Read it, then keep it.

You'll want to read it again when you have around 100 BASE jumps, and then again around 500 jumps. Each time, it will become more useful.

Groundrush. Simon Jakeman. Jonathan Cape; ISBN: 0099232618; (July 1993):

The first book ever published about BASE jumping.

BASE 66. Jevto Dedijer. IUniverse; ISBN: 0-595-33510-1 (October 2004);

Originally published in Swedish, this book has only recently been released in English. It is an excellent first hand account of one man's BASE experience, in the early days of the sport.

Album of Fluid Motion. Milton Van Dyke. Parabolic Press, Inc.; ISBN:

0915760037; (May 1982): The most valuable picture book I've read.

You may not understand why it matters at first, but once you start jumping cliffs and buildings in wind, the basic concepts in this book become invaluable. Don't worry about the technical jargon—just look at the pictures

*This article was written entirely by Tom Aiello, BASE 579. Tom has made more than 1000 BASE jumps from over 200 objects, and is the head instructor at the Snake River BASE Academy ([www.SnakeRiverBASE.com](http://www.SnakeRiverBASE.com)), in Twin Falls, Idaho, United States. All opinions are those of the author only. By making any fixed object parachute jump, you are taking your life in your own hands, and accepting responsibility for any possible outcome. Copyright 2005. Permission to reproduce and distribute in this **exact form only** is hereby granted.*

*Please address any questions, comments or corrections to the author at [Tom@SnakeRiverBASE.com](mailto:Tom@SnakeRiverBASE.com).*

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