Birdmen Take to the Skies

What’s the wildest thing you can imagine doing? Would you climb the world’s highest mountain? Would you skydive, bungee jump, or fly off the end of a ski jump? People who try these kinds of extreme sports may be braver than the rest of us . . . or maybe just crazier!

One of the hottest extreme sports lately is wingsuit flying, sometimes called body gliding. Wingsuit flying is probably the closest thing to flying that man has ever done. Fliers, or birdmen, wear a special suit that has wings under the arms and between the legs. These wings catch the wind and lift the flier. Many people have compared these suits to a flying squirrel’s body. In fact, some people call them squirrel suits. Once you become a pro at it, soaring above the ground may be one of the calmest sports around.

Birdmen jump from high places like cliffs or even higher places like airplanes in flight. They can glide as slowly as fifty miles per hour (mph) or faster than 100 mph, depending on how they hold their wings. The wings can slow them down by resisting the wind; a free-fall jump that might usually last fifteen seconds can be stretched out to a minute or longer in a wingsuit. Birdmen can also use their wings to soar for miles before landing. They land with a parachute, just like skydivers.

Make no mistake; wingsuit flying is a probably not the healthiest sport. It’s very risky. Fliers must have at least 200 skydives under their belt before they can try wingsuit flying. They usually also receive training from an experienced flier. Not everyone can be a birdman. Could you?