

# Eye in the Sky

Hear something buzzing in your ear? It might not be a mosquito. Drones let us spy on a world we could never see otherwise. Trouble is, their deadly impersonality makes the moral cost of the beauty they bring us extremely high. Pictured: The Portland skyline.





Unmanned aircraft systems give us the ability to observe Maine's unparalleled beauty from a lofty perspective. But at what cost?

BY SARAH MOORE

DRONE PHOTOGRAPHY BY CHRIS TRAFFORD

**I**t's a sunny Sunday out at Fort Williams Park: families are milling around the lighthouse, stopping to take pictures of the spectacular view. It's your typical weekend scene in Maine. Moments later, a large plastic quadcopter swoops into view, its rotor blades whirring as it dives back and forth over the heads of the unsuspecting public.

Only a few hours later, on the deck of Brian Boru, a young guy—perhaps a few pints down—sends his drone sweeping over the TD Bank parking lot, to the delight of his peers.

The sight of these futuristic flying pods is increasingly common in Maine. Even more frequent are the stories of drone-related incidents across the country: aviation interference, crowd-bombing, and an untimely landing on the White House lawn. Those who saw *Eye in the Sky* in theaters recently may experience a familiar chill. The film's examination into the deadly efficiency of drones in surveillance and military operation raises questions of moral accountability. Is this technology, with its all-seeing eyes, fruit from a poisonous tree?

#### THE DEAL WITH DRONES

Unmanned aircraft systems (UAS) exploded onto the consumer market in 2012. Their advanced, yet easy-to-control design and filming capability made them a mainstream success outside of the traditional model-aircraft circles. With social media turning everyone into an amateur photographer, the appeal was widespread.

In the intervening years, technology behind the machines has skyrocketed almost as quickly as their sales. At The Hobby Center in West Falmouth, you can pick



## PERSPECTIVE



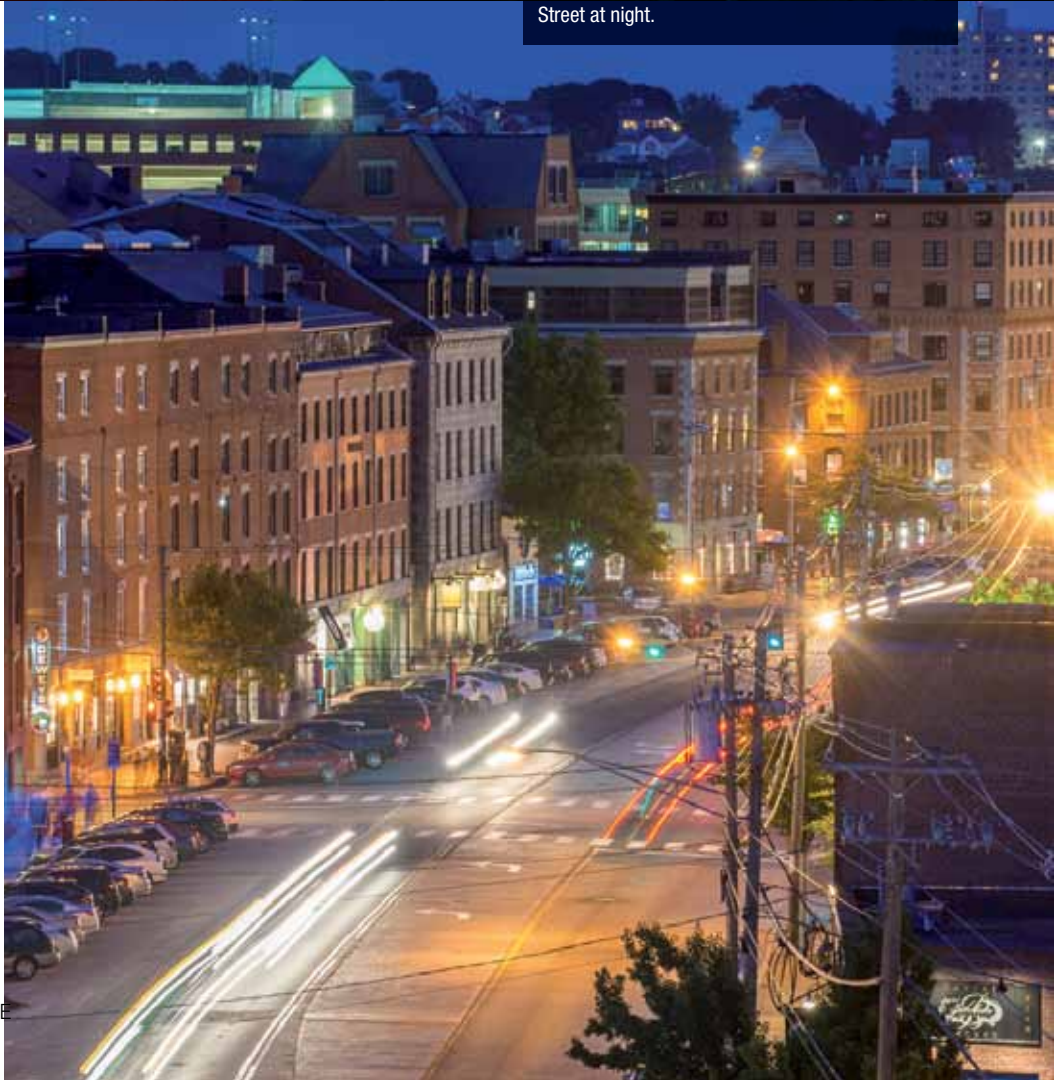
Portland Head Light as you've never seen it before. Below: Looking down at the bustle on Commerical Street at night.

up a UAS with onboard video camera for as little as \$59. The range goes right up to a hulking \$1,500 model—with 6 rotor blades, 4K video and 12 mega-pixel photo quality—straight out of science fiction. Go online and models from Asia are a fraction of the cost.

“We started stocking drones in 2012 and demand was huge,” says Hobby Center owner Ray Labonte. “Most of our buyers were enthusiasts—people who wanted to fly as a hobby.”

Others saw a business opportunity. Chris Trafford of HoverFlow was quick to realize the potential of drone photography, setting up his aerial imagery business in 2012 with a single hexacopter model and a camera. Four years later, the business owns a fleet of top-of-the-range drones, equipped with 360-degree DSLR cameras and advanced operation systems. Hoverflow boasts Angry Orchard, Tough Mudder, and L.L. Bean as clients.

Trafford’s videos are mesmerizing. His camera pans across familiar scenes—Higgins Beach, Portland’s wharfs—the lofty vantage point capturing the scale and beauty of Maine’s landscape. “Tourism-based shooting seems to be our main focus. We enjoy the variety of landscapes and seasonal changes Maine has to offer.”





**PUBLIC NUISANCE**

The view isn't all rosy from up here. Backlash against the flying pests has been rife in the past few years. Many bemoan the sight and sound of the insectile machines buzzing around areas of natural beauty, leading to a ban in 2014 on drone flying in the majority of national parks. The Federal Aviation Administration has scrambled to outline rules for drone users in the wake of a spate of incidents nationwide.

In March 2015, the Portland Jetport was brought to a standstill when a quadcopter landed and blocked a runway.

Chris Cameron, Assistant GM of the Portland Sea Dogs, recalls a rogue drone flying over Hadlock Field mid-game in 2015. "A few of the spectators started noticing this tiny aircraft buzzing over the field, and luckily our security and the police were able to quickly track down the operator. Nowadays our staff are trained to keep an eye out for drones overhead and report it to security."

According to park ranger Paige Button,



FROM TOP: CHRIS TRAFFORD; COREY TEMPLETON

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Tourism and real estate are the main market for Hoverflow's drone photography business. With these views, it's not hard to see why. Above: Belfast Harbor. Showing off the goods: 213 Foreside Road. A \$2.4M slice of prime real estate as seen from above [below left]. Right: Higgins Beach.







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the issue lies in a lack of education among operators, and a lack of control among law enforcers. “The biggest problem with drone flying is the fact there are no solid rules in place. The FAA is working to create national regulations, but until that happens, local government has little opportunity for enforcement or control.”

HoverFlow’s Chris Trafford is confident that the efforts of the FAA and drone manufacturers will continue to make drone practice safer and less invasive.

“GPS barriers around most airports, alti-



## PERSPECTIVE

tude caps, automated return-to-home systems are becoming common among drones manufactured today,” he notes. Updates to hardware and regulations are all positive in his book. Although... “We do wish we had captured Acadia National Park prior to the ban of drones over such protected lands.”

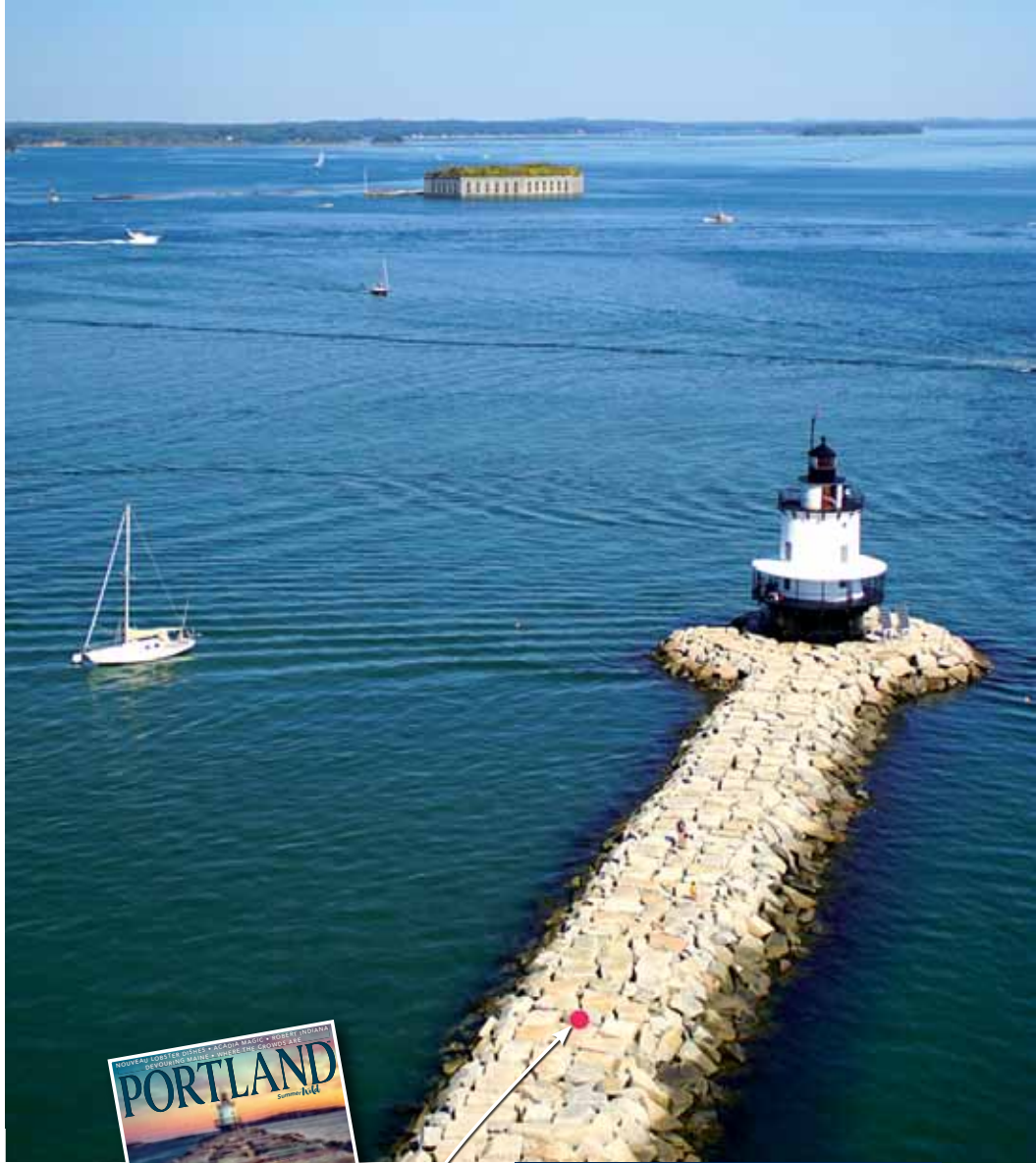
### THE FUTURE OF FLYING?

**W**hat lies in store for drones? Rich Swayze of the FAA predicted that December 2015 would see one million drones landing beneath Christmas trees across the country. In the end, the figure fell short at just over 700,000. Labonte notes that “sales have definitely started tapering off,” indicating that perhaps the craze has run its course—or that tightening FAA restrictions are cooling the ardor of hobby pilots.

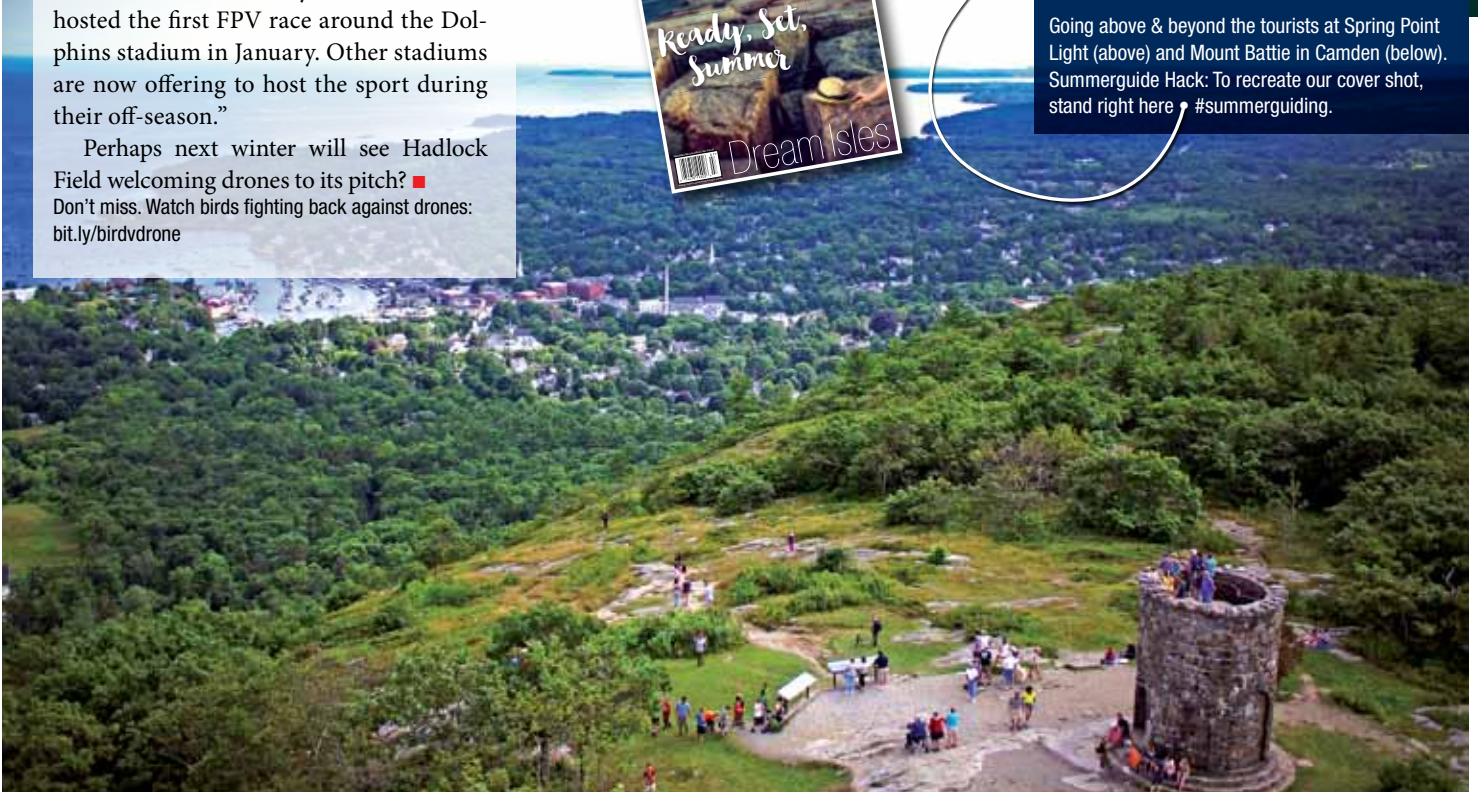
Instead, we could see a rise in alternative forms of flying fun. Miami Dolphins owner Stephen Ross just invested \$1 million in the Drone Racing League, a start-up looking to bring FPV [first-person drone racing] to the general public. The sport combines traditional racing and technology: competitors build and race their UAS while wearing video goggles linked to the drone’s front camera.

“FPV has really taken off out West. It could develop into a travelling competition like NASCAR,” says Labonte. “Ross hosted the first FPV race around the Dolphins stadium in January. Other stadiums are now offering to host the sport during their off-season.”

Perhaps next winter will see Hadlock Field welcoming drones to its pitch? ■ Don’t miss. Watch birds fighting back against drones: [bit.ly/birdvdrone](http://bit.ly/birdvdrone)



Going above & beyond the tourists at Spring Point Light (above) and Mount Battie in Camden (below). Summerguide Hack: To recreate our cover shot, stand right here • #summerguiding.



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