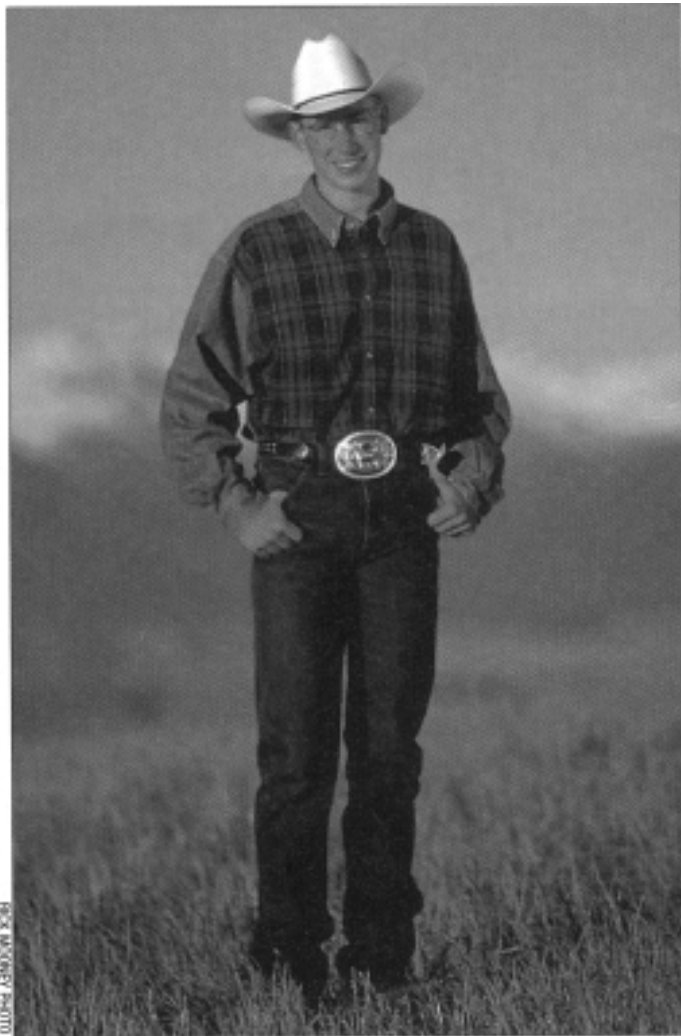


# A Discovery of Earth, Sky and Space

*NJAA Environmental Stewardship Essay Award winner Tom Patterson and his family travel to Florida to attend the Discovery shuttle launch and send off fellow Angus breeder Col. Mark Lee.*

BY JERILYN JOHNSON



**Big Sky Country** - Tom Patterson, 16, enjoys life on his family's ranch near Columbus, Mont. Patterson won the 1996 NJAA Environmental Stewardship Award program with his essay titled "Preservation of Our Boundless Pasture." It covered the subject of rangeland noxious weeds and how ranchers in Montana are employing safer biological controls instead of chemicals to combat weeds such as leafy spurge.

**IT'S 355 A.M. ON A CLEAR** but cool Florida night.

Countless stars are out, along with a few thousand Earth-bound spectators. Tom Patterson's heart is pulsating to the point he's sure it's going to leap out of his throat. He wonders if Col. Mark Lee and other members of the Discovery STS-82 crew feel the same. From his bleacher seat Tom can clearly see the countdown clock — less than one minute to liftoff.

Tom has been awake for more than 24 hours, minus a 30-minute nap at the hotel. It was a long trip from Montana to Cape Canaveral, Fla., even by jet airliner and rental car. Still, this teenager is far from being sleepy. It must be true that adrenaline refuels your body and senses.

30 seconds and counting...

Tom looks at his mother, Pam, and brother, Mark, and the other anxious people around them. All eyes and prayers are fixed on the spotlighted shuttle three miles away.

4,3,2,1 . . . blastoff!

Tom watches in awe as the shuttle slowly lifts off the launch pad. The blast from the rocket engines illuminates the sky above. The rockets don't just fire and roar, they pulsate with so much power that the vibrations travel along the ground, through Tom's feet and legs and right smack into his chest.

Then something else catches Tom's attention. As he watches in amazement, fish in a nearby lagoon leap from their watery habitat into the air. With a quick flash of their silvery fins they repeat this ritual, then retreat into the murky depths.

Tom wonders why the fish reacted this way. For a moment, he realizes, he had felt like joining in their dance.

With a final cheer from the

crowd, the shuttle speeds up and continues its journey into the Earth's upper atmosphere and then into orbit above our planet.

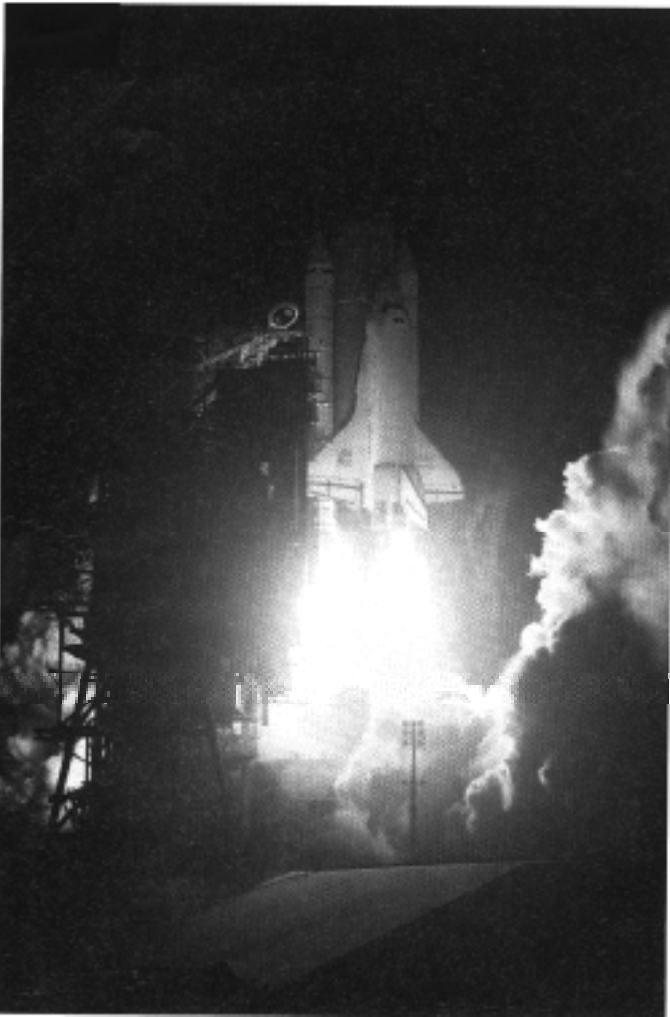
For the next 10 days Tom and his family closely follow the Discovery Shuttle mission. They watch the NASA channel in their hotel room and read news reports. They also take the opportunity to learn about the NASA program on a tour of the Kennedy Space Center.

Although Tom is an avid fan of aviation, he does admit to getting a little air sick when flying. Still, if given the opportunity someday, he says he'd go on a space shuttle mission.

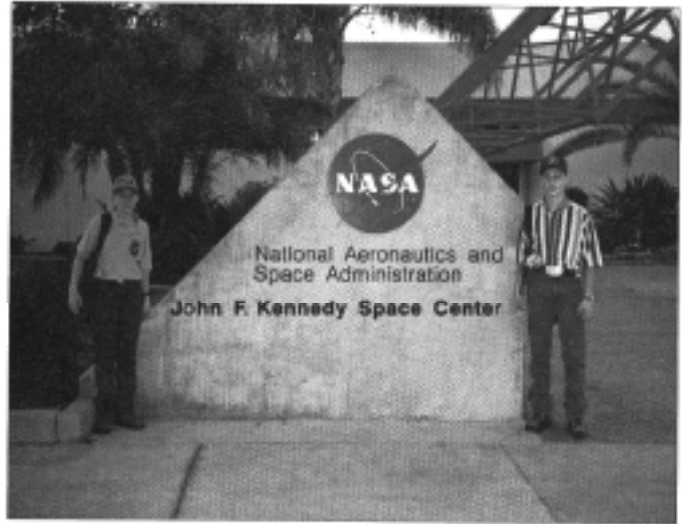
"After visiting with Col. Lee, seeing his shuttle launch and touring Kennedy Space Center, I am in awe of the knowledge and training of astronauts, not to mention the powerful and technologically advanced tools they use," Tom says. "But what I admire most is astronauts' bravery and dedication to their work. They really give meaning to the 'right stuff.'"

Soon after arriving home in Montana, Tom and his family learned that the Discovery crew had completed its mission and safely landed in Florida. It seemed fitting that both had started and completed their worthwhile journeys on the same days.

**Editor's note:** See pages 118-19 for a special NASA photo report of the Discovery shuttle mission. A special thank you goes to Col. Mark Lee for supporting the NJAA Environmental Stewardship Award program and for providing these photographs.



**Spectacular night launch** — NASA's Discovery shuttle lifts off from the Cape Canaveral, Fla., launch pad at 3:56 a.m. on Feb. 11. The 10-day mission to service the Hubble Space Telescope was a complete success.



**Florida field trip** - Tom and his brother, Mark, visit the Kennedy Space Center museum and exhibits to learn more about NASA's history and its current programs. Tom, who has had a strong interest in aviation since he was a young boy, says he especially enjoyed the Saturn 5 rocket display and the shuttle and mission control computer simulation exhibits.



**Meeting a real** — life astronaut-Patterson is congratulated by Col. Mark Lee after making his environmental stewardship presentation at the American Angus Association Annual Meeting in Louisville, Ky., last November Tom's award, sponsored by the Angus Journal, was a trip to Cape Canaveral, Fla., to watch Lee's Discovery Shuttle launch on Feb. 11. Tom and his family sat with Lee's parents at a special viewing site three miles away from the launch pad.



**A rising Phoenix** — At a viewing site three miles away Dean Hurlbut, director of activities for the American Angus Association, took this photograph of the Discovery shuttle launch. "It was an incredible sight — even brighter than the sun at dawn," Hurlbut says.

