



# Droned!

**UAVs INVADE NETWORK TV AIRSPACE  
WITH A NEW SERIES ON DISCOVERY'S  
SCIENCE CHANNEL** BY MATT BOYD

It's official: Drones have arrived. Of course, for most of us, that happened years ago, but when drones get their own cable-television reality series, you know they have truly made the big time. Science Channel—one of Discovery Channel's family of networks—debuted its new series *Droned* on July 22, and it will air a total of 10 episodes in its first season.

The show follows the exploits of the staff of Pigeon Vision, a Florida-based aerial cinematography and drone customization business, as they travel to exotic locales to work on a variety of drone-related projects, exploring new technology, testing its application, and interacting with an interesting array of celebrities and VIPs in the process. The format blends aspects of tech-oriented problem-solving shows, like *MythBusters*, with a task-oriented situational show, like *Dirty Jobs*, and a healthy dose of extreme adventure, à la *Survivorman* or *Storm Chasers*. And while the structure may draw from some of those established Discovery Channel hits, the dedicated focus on drone culture and capability makes it, at once, unique and more relevant as it capitalizes on the public fascination with the fast-evolving technology of the world of unmanned aircraft systems. It also serves as a great ambassador for drones, exposing the viewing audience to the benefits of the technology. It's a great opportunity; I was excited to view the first couple of episodes to see how the finished product measured up and to get some insight into what the series creators have in mind for its future.

## HIGHLIGHTS AND EPISODE OVERVIEW

I was able to watch the first two episodes in preparation for this story and to see previews of several more in the 10-episode season.

The first episode slated to air is "Water World," and it features a pair of aquatic-themed projects for the team to tackle. First, Dani and Ryan of Pigeon Vision meet up with the Marine Team search-and-rescue department at Fort Lauderdale Fire Station 49—one of the Florida's busiest—to devise a system to locate accident victims stranded in deep water and quickly deploy rescue flotation devices. They attach an autoinflating flotation ring big enough for multiple victims via a self-leveling drop rig, and test-fly it for balance and drop-target accuracy. They retrofit their quad with steeper-pitched props for more lift to handle the payload of the inflatable ring. Then, Ryan and Bill, another member of the Pigeon Vision team, head out into deep water off the Florida coast in search of trophy fish—from the air! They devise a plan to use a polarizing camera lens with image locations watermarked onto a GPS grid system to locate fish-rich waters to save charter operators time and fuel. Because of payload and flight duration requirements and the need to hand-launch, Bill chooses

an 80-inch fixed-wing Horizon Carbon-Z Cub, and the camera is set to take time-delayed photos at set intervals. The next step involves programming the onboard GPS to fly a fixed pattern to create an image grid that charter captains can then navigate with.

The second episode, "Silicon Beach," takes the crew to Los Angeles, California, and introduces technician team member Roger. Dani and Ryan meet up with Team Tempest parkour/freerunning athletes Jesse La Flair, Cory DeMeyers, and Marcus Gustafsson at the abandoned zoo in Los Angeles's Griffith Park to shoot an aerial chase sequence from Dani's Blade Chroma. Dani flies over, around, and even under the runners as they perform their stunts. Dani also joins Roger in San Pedro to help the crew of a racing yacht optimize their performance by developing a drone with an onboard telemetry anemometer that can scout the course up to a mile ahead and transmit wind-speed and direction data back to the boat in real time. And last, Ryan and Roger head out to Manhattan Beach to meet up with social media sensation Brock O'Hurn to help him expand his brand by shooting some paddleboarding action video via drone.

The show's producers also teased me with highlights for upcoming episodes:



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## THE TEAM

A show like this lives or dies by the blend of personalities it brings together. In *Droned*, traditional roles are represented in the form of the quirky drone tech and the resident drone designer/engineer, but the show's producers have shrewdly chosen to complement them with dynamic personalities in the form of an energetic front man with a knack for showmanship and a stereotype-smashing daredevil pilot. The lineup consists of:



**Ryan Haake** ◀ Co-owner of Pigeon Vision, actor, and self-described adrenaline junkie. Star of Tyler Perry's hit TV Show *If Loving You Is Wrong*, Ryan brings his entertainment-industry contacts to expand the company's clientele and joins the team in the field for adventurous and challenging projects. Ryan is a veteran Spartan Race competitor and an avid surfer, snowboarder, mountain biker, and skateboarder.



**Dani Viera** ◀ The team's drone pilot. The diminutive dynamo is noted for her stick skills and brash confidence. Reflexes honed on video games let her deftly navigate through jungles, mountains, and daunting obstacles to capture some truly amazing aerial footage. When not at the sticks, she is a crack-shot archer and scuba diver. Dani is sure to be an audience favorite!



**Roger Yang** ◀ Pigeon Vision's resident drone technician, affectionately nicknamed "MacGyver" because of his knack for problem solving in the field. Roger got his start tearing down and rebuilding computers, and has expanded his natural aptitude to airborne electronics and onboard mechanicals, adapting designs quickly to tackle the unpredictable project challenges.



**Bill Piedra** ◀ The team's lead drone designer and software developer. Bill has more than 30 years of experience designing, building, and flying all types of radio-controlled aircraft. Trained in aeronautical science and engineering, he designs innovative drone platforms and accessories for specific tasks in various episodes.



**Darren Darnborough** ◀ Pigeon Vision's business development consultant. Darren uses his connections in the entertainment, start-up, and tech industries to help secure opportunities for the team.

Roger and Dani doing preflight checks on their DJI Phantom and Blade Chroma drones.



### IN THIS EPISODE

**Guests:** Rally pro cyclists Tom Soladay and Jesse Anthony; top FPV drone-racing pros Ken Loo, Skitzo, Matty Stuntz, Freybott, and StingerSwarm

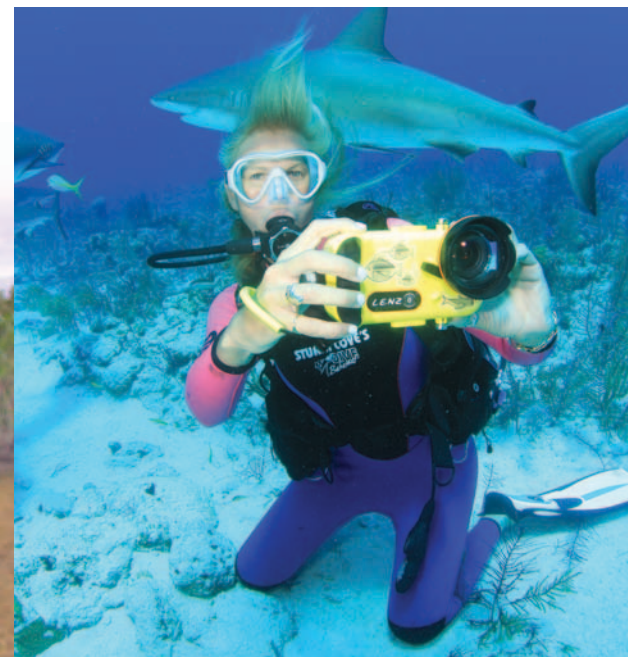
**Drone focus:** Designing, programming, and practicing with an FPV racing drone



Dani high-fives FPV AIRVUZ Team racer Ken Loo after a successful test of her racing drone.

### "CATCH ME IF YOU CAN" // California/Arizona

Dani is gearing up for her first first-person-view (FPV) racing competition with the International Drone Racing Association, which requires her to build and test a specialized racing drone. To sharpen her skills, she trains with a professional drone racer who has just competed in a million-dollar race in Dubai. Pigeon Vision works with powerhouse Rally Cycling, which has amassed 260 wins since 2007 and incorporates drones into the company's hi-tech training sessions as the staff prepares for the new season.



While working on their shark-identifying imaging technology, the Pigeon Vision crew had time for some R&R in Puerto Vallarta, Mexico.

### "SWIMMING WITH SHARKS" // Mexico/Bahamas

Pigeon Vision is called to Puerto Vallarta, Mexico, to produce a promotional reel to attract new guests. Dani and Roger get exclusive access to the uninhabited Marieta Islands as well, capturing the ancient architecture and seeing the abundant whale population up close. The team also tackles a request from a client who wants a drone that can find and track sharks in the Bahamas, the world's second most infested waters. It's the perfect opportunity for Pigeon Vision to use a prototype drone programmed to identify sharks with imaging technology. The trip coincides with the Bahamas Junkanoo Carnival, a celebration of Bahamian culture and heritage that is bundled into a collection of concerts, cultural shows, and street parades.

### IN THIS EPISODE

**Drone focus:** Develop and test a shark-tracking drone that uses imaging technology; use drones to highlight areas of Puerto Vallarta





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## "WHAT HAPPENS IN VEGAS" // Nevada

Criss Angel is about to launch a new stage show and invites Darren to his private magic facility in Las Vegas, Nevada, where he is treated to a tour and is hired to shoot a drone opening that will be part of Angel's new "Supernaturalists" show. Meanwhile, the Palms Casino Resort welcomes the staff of Pigeon Vision in true Vegas style, hosting them in a \$35,000-a-night villa penthouse and inviting them to drone above the exclusive Ghostbar Dayclub party, which rages on the 55th floor, overlooking the city.

### IN THIS EPISODE

-  **Guests:** Criss Angel, the Supernaturalists, and local Las Vegas celebrities
-  **Drone focus:** Photography and channel hopping




In addition to filming the opener for magician Criss Angel's new show "The Supernaturalists," the Pigeon Vision crew shoots in the Las Vegas desert with "The Femmes."



## "INTO THE WILD" // Florida

Pigeon Vision ventures into Florida's Everglades with Bill and Roger using a customized drone that can be launched into the swamps to track feral hogs using a thermal camera. Ryan and Roger visit a gator farm. Roger and Dani skydive for the first time.

### IN THIS EPISODE

-  **Drone focus:** Different application of thermal cameras to track wild hogs to aid in nuisance-animal control



Daredevil Dani decides to experience her drone's perspective firsthand, when she and Roger go skydiving while on assignment in the Everglades.



Dani goes along for the ride in a racecar while covering the "Festival of Speed" racing event from the air in Barbados.

## "FESTIVAL OF SPEED" // Barbados

The team is hired by racing facility Bushy Park in Barbados to cover the Festival of Speed, a two-day motor-sports event featuring current Formula 1 champion Lewis Hamilton as well as action-packed races in superbikes, rally cars, monster trucks, and stunt bikes. Meanwhile, Roger takes a trip to Los Angeles to meet up with his friend and security expert Winston Howes, who gives him a lesson in hacking a drone.

### IN THIS EPISODE

-  **Guests:** Formula 1 racing champ Lewis Hamilton
-  **Drone focus:** Software that can hack a drone



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The crew rigs up a paintball-shooting anti-infantry drone that can track and neutralize targets from the air.

## IN THIS EPISODE



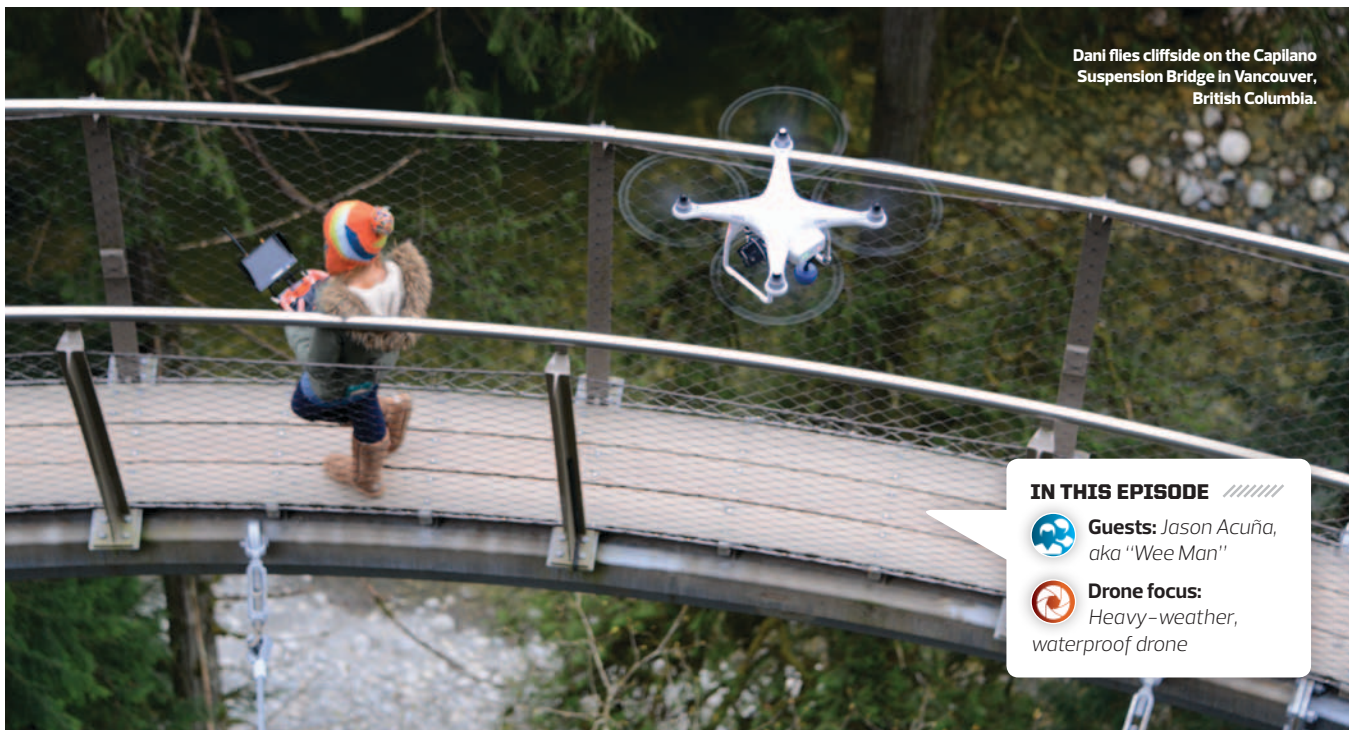
**Guests:** Ryan Hoag; Tyler Perry



**Drone focus:** A predator drone capable of tracking targets and shooting paintballs; a customized RC aircraft that flies vertically and horizontally

## “ALWAYS BE CLOSING” // Minnesota/Arizona

The team heads to Minneapolis to shoot a new commercial for AirVuz ([www.airvuz.com](http://www.airvuz.com)), a leading site for shared drone footage. While in town, the team unveils a customized “predator” drone capable of shooting paintballs, which is tested on speedy former NFL player Ryan Hoag. Pigeon Vision’s Ryan and Bill meet up with Tyler Perry, delivering a customized Anaconda VTOL, which takes off like a helicopter but flies like a plane. Tyler, a huge RC plane enthusiast, invites them to his private 100,000-acre ranch, where they get an exclusive tour of Tyler’s fleet of RC aircraft and drones.



Dan flies cliffside on the Capilano Suspension Bridge in Vancouver, British Columbia.

## IN THIS EPISODE



**Guests:** Jason Acuña, aka “Wee Man”



**Drone focus:** Heavy-weather, waterproof drone

## “VERTIGO” // British Columbia

Pigeon Vision goes to new heights to use a heavy-weather, waterproof drone for the Sea to Sky Gondola in Vancouver, British Columbia. The team experiences a whirlwind of activities, including snowboarding at Grouse Mountain, cliff walking on the Capilano Suspension Bridge, exploring the popular Granville Island Public Market, and touring a craft brewery. Meanwhile, Darren meets up with Jason “Wee Man” Acuña, star of the *Jackass* films, in Long Beach, California, for some skateboarding.





Ryan and Dani visit with IndyCar champion and hardcore RC enthusiast Juan Pablo Montoya (center) to collaborate with his sponsor Horizon Hobbies on a hopped-up electric jet capable of 160mph!

## “MIAMI HEAT” // Florida

Legendary Indianapolis 500 racecar driver and avid RC plane enthusiast Juan Pablo Montoya teams up with Pigeon Vision and Horizon Hobby in Miami, Florida, to test a supercharged RC jet that rips through the sky at speeds more than 150mph. Meanwhile, on the other side of town, some of the team films a video for multiplatinum recording artist Jeff Timmons (98 Degrees), featuring the hip-hop artist J. Dash and the colorful Hurricane Bhangra dance team.



### IN THIS EPISODE



**Guests:** Indy 500 champion Juan Pablo Montoya; multiplatinum artist Jeff Timmons, hip-hop artist J. Dash, and Hurricane Bhangra dance team



**Drone focus:** Supercharged electric duct fan, radio-controlled Horizon Habu Jet



Rapper J. Dash enlists Pigeon Vision to shoot drone footage for his new music video.

## CONCLUSION

The episodes I previewed did a nice job illustrating the diverse and positive applications of drone systems, and they certainly produced some excellent aerial footage. I did find them a little light on tech—the “how” of tackling each project’s challenges. Obviously, after just two episodes, the producers would still be fine-tuning the appropriate balance of technical and lifestyle to find and satisfy the audience, but I’m hopeful that, once the cast personalities are established, the show will emphasize more of the engineering and innovation aspects of drones. As a human-interest format and as a positive introduction to drones, the show seems to work—especially for audiences unfamiliar or only casually familiar with drones. In the coming episodes, the show will have the chance to expand upon that formula, and with star power and high production quality, it has the opportunity to present good things. I look forward to seeing how it evolves—and especially how it is received by audiences. ✨