

Prepare for some fun

Summer is on its way and soon we'll see pilots scrambling for sunhats, maps and loggers. But wait a second: it's been a long winter. Before you tackle your Silver distance or 100km Diploma, Debb Evans (right) has collected a few tips to help you



Writer and broadcaster Debb Evans first tried gliding six years ago.

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LET'S START with a cautionary tale. We all love a good disaster story, and this is a great one I witnessed. Names have been changed to protect the guilty. You, of course, would never get into this kind of mess. Would you?

It was a lovely afternoon at the gliding club, warm and sunny with a gentle breeze but little or no thermal activity; and it was getting slightly hazy. This didn't stop John from wanting to fly, though; he was as keen as they come. Because of John's modest soaring experience, the duty instructor asked the tug pilot to tow him to 2,000ft above the airfield, so John could gently float back down without any worry about getting lost.

Off he went. Forty-five minutes passed with no sign of him coming back. Odd. OK, try the radio. Nothing.

Another 20 minutes went by and people were starting to worry. He really should have been back by now. So a motorglider and a tug were launched: no sign of John or his glider. Then, 15 minutes later, who should walk casually into the hangar but John! That nice farmer who had provided him with a landing site had also dropped him off...

The first reaction was utter relief – John was safe. Time to fetch the glider. There was, though, a snag. All John could tell his friends was that it was about 15 or so miles west of the airfield, roughly speaking. He hadn't found out the name of the farm, the farmer or the nearest village, and the farmer had already headed home. Oh dear.

So the tug was launched again to try to spot the glider, although dusk was now fast approaching.

Meanwhile, attention at the airfield turned to the trailer. It was locked, so we looked the other way while the lock was given a "little help" to open. Ah – there's another glider in the trailer. Ooh, wrong trailer altogether.

OK, not a problem, the team quickly found the correct trailer and with word from the tug driver on a rough location for John's glider, things were looking up. They hooked up the trailer and headed for the gate.

All too soon, they realised the lights on the trailer weren't working, and it had a flat. Once they had fixed it and started on the task in hand, it was midnight before they found the correct field, and 02.00hrs before

they got back to the airfield – more than a little grumpy.

Although John's cross-country career began a little sooner than anyone expected, many of his mistakes are common ones for pilots who are first starting to flying beyond gliding range of their home site. Here's how to avoid them.

A few weeks before

As you feel the weather start to change, it's natural to start dreaming about venturing

beyond the circuit. With the hedgerows turning greener, the days getting longer and warmer, and a Cross-Country Endorsement burning a hole in your logbook, it's time to start thinking seriously about the thermal soaring season.

Our first tip is to spend some time in whatever glider you plan to soar in. Make sure you are current in the aircraft, and feel confident in its performance. Do you know how far it will glide for every 1,000ft of height?

It's no good circuit bashing all winter in a K-21 then expecting to do brilliantly on your first trip in an Astir for months.

While you're getting current in your glider, brush up on your thermalling techniques, too. Even if you plan on just staying local for now, thermals are starting to bubble and if you do want to make the most of every knot, then practice will help. It could well pay to get an instructor to sit in the back and give you some pointers.

Imagine your disappointment and your embarrassment if you couldn't get away on a booming day, simply because you couldn't use the lift.

It goes without saying that another key element of cross-country soaring is finding your way. While the weather still isn't perfect, take the time to refresh your navigation skills. Most of us would admit that while we can read a road map fairly well, it is very different when you're airborne. There are more than enough tall tales of people who land out but can't actually tell their crew where they are. If you are struggling with navigation, grab an instructor and practise in a two-seater.

While in an ideal world we could all go cross-country and land nicely back at our club with several thousand feet to spare, the reality is that most pilots do need to land out sometimes. It's an eventuality that many dread, but all must be prepared for. Having your field landings checked is vital

Checklist

Cleared to go cross-country
Current on glider
Practised thermalling
Understand navigation
Field landing checks
Map study

Trailer all working
Retrieve crew
Official Observer
Barograph
Logger
Batteries
GPS
Know how the kit works

Weather
NOTAMs
Water
Map
Sun hat
Food
Toilet kit
Sunscreen
Shades
Mobile phone
Key phone numbers
Money



Std Cirrus

Make sure you take the necessary supplies if you plan a long flight

(www.whiteplanes.com)

if you plan to fly out of gliding range of your home site. However, if the idea makes you uneasy, don't stew about it – work on it. Once you have put in some time and effort getting comfortable with the technique of picking a field and landing in it, the freedom and challenge of cross-country flying are yours for the taking.

The week before

So you've brushed up on the skills you need to fly cross-country, but there's plenty more to do. In the week before you intend to fly, consider your intended route carefully. It's worth preparing some alternatives so that you have options whatever way the wind's blowing on the day.

There are all sorts of factors to take into account. Is it easy to navigate? Are there obvious landmarks? How about places to land if you need to? Will your route mean that you'll be going near airspace or other NOTAMed or active airfields?

Once you've decided on possible tasks, study the map at length, and think about what it'll look like from the air. Make some mental notes on what you'd expect to see at different points along your way. It will help keep you oriented in the sky. If your planned course takes you to places you haven't flown over before, talk to good pilots who have, and get their thoughts about the area, the soaring conditions, and the aerial view. Remember, knowledge is power.

If it's at all feasible, take a look at the state of fields along your route. There might appear to be some lovely fields or parkland ripe for landing, but if a farmer has decided to put hay bales or an adventure playground in them, then you'll need to land elsewhere. It's also worth noting if the ground is still boggy or nice and firm. Take into account the stage of crop development, and whether the fields – are they larger than you're used

to, or generally smaller? – are bordered by big stone walls or little hedges.

Keep an eye on the weather patterns. While the television forecasts may not give you all the detail you might want, they can warn you of the trends. There are a host of websites, including the Met Office and Weatherjack, that can give you very detailed information. If the forecast is marginal midweek, remember that the Met man is not always right, but prepare yourself mentally to either declare or decline on the day.

Next comes some housekeeping advice. Make sure you've got an Official Observer sorted out, as you don't want to put all the work for a badge flight in only to get nothing suitably recorded.

Check and double check that the kit in your glider is all working and charged: batteries, GPS, barograph, logger, etc. It's also worth reminding yourself of how all the gadgets work, that way there's no room for a mistake on the day. Half-way up a weak thermal 50km from home is not a good time to try to learn which buttons to press.

If you plan to take a camera with you, check that it's got film or is fully charged, depending on the type.

Nominate your retrieve crew early on. If they are pilots too, they might be planning to fly and so you'll need to negotiate, bribe or offer to return the favour should the need arise. Make sure you give them a full brief on what you are planning to do, and the route you expect to fly.

The next tip should be obvious, but I have to mention it. Make sure your trailer is roadworthy, accessible and that your crew has a vehicle that can pull it. A great idea is to hook it up and check the electrics, and then leave it attached to the car when you take off. That way there will be no room for error. Then should you land out, all your

crew needs to do is get in and go. Not spend 45 minutes trying to find your trailer, only to have no key, break in and find it's the wrong one. Embarrassing.

Along with the trailer, check your crew has the necessary kit to de-rig the glider. Imagine everyone's frustration after an hour or more's drive to get to the landout site if you're unable to get the glider home. When people are offering their help and support, it's nice for them to see the person they're helping hasn't stitched them up.

Before you launch

So you've brushed up your skills, done your background work and the weather is on side. There are just a few last-minute things to remember before you launch.

First of all, double check that your kit in the glider is working, your trailer is all set to go and your crew are on standby.

Then make sure you've got everything you need in the glider with you. Remember things like water (absolutely essential), your sun hat and shades, and sunscreen too.

Carry something to eat if you plan on a long flight. Energy bars that won't melt are a good idea.

For longer flights it's also good to take the means to spend a penny if you need to. Difficult, yes, but important for comfort and concentration.

Take a mobile phone if possible, making sure you have the numbers you might need, like the launchpoint and clubhouse of your own club and your retrieve crew's numbers; it might be worth having the numbers for any other airfields you may be passing near.

And in case you do land out and end up buying dinner for your rescuers, best take your wallet along too.

Now all you need are great thermals, wonderful visibility and happy landings. Have a great summer!