

## Soaring In the Wisps for Silver

The instructor, Pete Kroll, landed the club's two seat glider at Osceola airport shortly before noon after his second flight with a student and soon appeared walking toward the sun tent with purpose in his step. Early weather predictions indicated that today would be a good soaring day, but most of us on the ground really could not yet know what would happen. Pete, however, had felt some very strong lift during his last flight, and he now knew what was coming. The club's Pilatus glider was already out by the runway and he spotted me standing near it. He guessed I was unaware of the potential of the day as he called over: "Hey, it's a good day for your five hour silver duration leg" - "take the Pilatus, go now and you can get it!" He added that he would serve as the official observer of the flight, and would sign the badge documents if I succeeded. With that kind of support I was suddenly alert and very motivated as I did a thorough preflight of the glider. Then I simply turned my whole attention to the task of flying the five hour duration leg of the silver badge.

Water, sandwich, handheld radio and cell phone with its clock were the only things I brought with me. By twelve thirty, Lee, the tow pilot, had me connected up and we were off and climbing moments later. The cumulus clouds were blossoming all above us by that time and the tow went very fast. Lee was on the radio urging me to drop off in lift as soon as I could. Oh, it was good all right, and he was into strong thermals at 1,500 feet. But that was too low for me. Holding on till 2,500 feet, I finally pulled the release; got well enough away and soon after found a thermal that took me to cloudbase, then at about 5,000 feet. Now to settle down for the ride.

A five hour flight is a long time to sit in a close fitting cockpit. Such a task should not be allowed to become dull or monotonous. My plan was to explore the area both east and west of the St Croix River, while at the same time concentrating on staying as high as the bases allowed me to go. My first destination was north to Taylors Falls. While keeping the airport in regular view, I then worked slowly eastward till better cloud formations drew me to the south. Here, 6,500 feet was the highest the bases got, at least for the time being. Soon I adjusted to a standard thermalling routine. First, climb to cloudbase, straighten out, and then just push the stick forward as the gray base got close enough. Sixty knots typically was the tradeoff speed that kept the glider from being pulled up too close to the cloud for comfort. Lift would vary from zero sink to 600 feet up per minute, sustained. If the clouds threatened to overwhelm me, I just turned for the wispy edges where lift still worked but the visibility was safe.

Now, with so much altitude in hand, the idea of searching for new locations to fly over became much more appealing. Heading west over the St Croix, I aimed for large cloud formations over Big Marine Lake and Forest Lake. Highway 97 through Scandia was a prominent feature below; so it became my guide. My thermalling skills were gradually improving with the constant practice. Lift seemed to be everywhere as the day quickly turned out to be the best I've experienced in a very long time. Other gliders would occasionally appear both above and below me. Pete and J.D. Teter were flying a Blanik under a huge cloudbase that just kept on giving; so I climbed up and turned with them for a short while. Pete signaled me with the halfway mark at that point. He had his observer's eye on me.

Eventually, I turned south and ended up over Marine on St Croix. Here the clouds were thinning out and I was losing some altitude. Taking a chance, I headed under some wispy cloud formations that turned out to be the tops of lift that would take me to my best altitudes of the flight. With a much higher angle of bank, the climb speeds jumped and the audio on the variometer hit new high pitches. More fun! 7,500 feet above ground was the best altitude gained, and I managed to

get there more than just once. The wispy formations turned into full clouds and that was where I stayed for the rest of the main flight.

Once the five hours were well under my belt, I gave up looking for lift and slowly soared north back over the river in a constant descent. Approaching the airport, there was so much altitude left to lose that I chose to do a few wingovers and tight spiraling turns that got me down to 3,000 feet. Then, in order to get down to landing altitude, I pulled out full airbrakes, stuck the nose down and flew directly towards the airport pattern. Announcing my intentions to Osceola airport traffic on the radio before crossing over the runway at 1,500 feet, I kept the brakes cracked slightly open, flew a normal left pattern and landed. By now it was a quarter to six. Never before have I been so eager to get out of a glider after a landing. There was a certain part of me that had no feeling left in it, and I wanted to walk more than anything else. Pete and Chris Bolf drove out to get the glider and me. It was a thrill just to shake their hands. The long sit was done! Many thanks for the encouragement and coverage, Pete. Let's get something to eat now.



Pilatus on short final

Paul Esser – RWSA June 2007