

Let's go and play!



How to be a better pilot

CFI Tim King continues his series aimed at the beginner paraglider pilot

No 16: First time over the back

MAKING THAT FIRST STEP, TAKING A THERMAL UP AND OVER THE BACK of take-off and then drifting with it, climbing away and leaving the "security" of the ridge behind, can be a big challenge. The psychological element of making this leap into the unknown can play a larger part in the process than the actual practical skills required.

Once you've grasped the fundamental skills of recognising, feeling and turning in lifting air and being 'in tune' with your vario, you just need to make the mind decision to go over the back and follow the lift. Prepare yourself with prior knowledge of the terrain immediately downwind or down track of your take-off site, and be happy with assessing the safety aspects of the shape of the hill and the type of terrain that you may encounter.

Fly over the back once and you'll wonder what all the fuss was about. You'll soon be making many flights over the back, increasing your chances of connecting with another thermal to achieve longer and longer XC's.

If you are used to ridge soaring, when it's thermic you need to readjust your mind-set so that you are beginning to fly the lift and not the ridge. This can be tricky on crowded ridges with some pilots ridge soaring and others 360-ing in thermals. Sometimes it's necessary to fly the traffic and not the lift - very annoying but a great motivator to get up and away!

To work a thermal efficiently you will need to be comfortable performing consecutive 360-degree turns, at varying turn rates, bank angles and airspeeds. You will need to practice these 360s in clear airspace and with ample ground clearance. Make use of those light top-to-bottom days to practice out and away from the ridge. Wind, lift, sink

and congestion are all factors that determine how you 360, or indeed whether you 360 at all!

My aim here is not go into the detail of actual thermalling technique - practical lessons are more appropriate for this - but, to get over the idea that you *can* leave the hill and go away with the lift. This, and being comfortable with landing out, are the first keys to the door of cross-country flight. Let's look at a typical scenario for taking that first thermal over the back.

Assuming that you've decided that the lay of the land downwind is safe to bomb out in, should you lose your thermal and not make it back to the hill, let's go and play.

There's a light soarable breeze on the slope and you stay aloft with ease. This is perfect - you have the backup of ridge lift should you make a blunder out in front and can top up your height again if needed. This also gives you plenty of opportunity to see and feel for the signs of a thermal.

You need to tune in all your senses now, picking up on the vital clues that can present themselves. Sight - can you see birds or other pilots climbing, swallows feeding on insects being lifted, or dandelion heads or grass wafting up in the lift? New clouds forming near by? Smell - the scent of the crop below (or perhaps the dung heap), or maybe

smoke from a fire. Touch - warmer blasts of air on your face and the feedback from the wing through the controls and harness reacting to the moving air.

The glider shakes and pitches a little and starts to climb. Expert pilots may well put in a quick 360 at this early stage, but let's assume that you are not all that experienced with these bubbly phenomena. Initially you can work the lift by effecting a series of figure-of-eight turns. The information that you receive in these few turns is vital to enable you to exploit the lift fully and to stick with the thermal. As you "feel" your way within the thermal you need to be mentally mapping out the areas of lift and sink, whilst appreciating the degree of drift downwind.

With a little experience you will be able to 'feel' where the stronger areas of lift are. This will determine the direction of your first turn (assuming you are the only or first pilot in the thermal). Your figures-of-eight should now have taken you high enough to safely execute your first 360. Often the thermal will develop and become more established and easier to work once away from the ridge top.

Your mental map is now crucial. All the way around your first turn you should be feeling where the best lift is and adjusting your turn rate accordingly, aiming to centre your orbit on the area of maximum lift - the core. A thermal may have what seems like several cores; that's OK - there's more choice!



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As a rule of thumb, if the lift is strong and small in area then tight banked turns are required. If the lift is weak and the area large, a more efficient climb rate can be achieved by turning flatter and slower - a good technique here is to fly slowly and adjust your turn rate with the outside control as well as weight shift. Sometimes a strong thermal may push you away - be the boss, dig in and turn on that core! Settled in nicely now, you climb away.

OK, so perhaps you make a wrong turn, fall out of the thermal and lose it. You are too far over the back to glide back to the top of the ridge, so glide downwind and try and pick up another thermal. You should have already thought about your next thermal whilst climbing in the first, identifying any potential thermal sources downwind. If you're high, look at the sky - if you're low, look at ground sources below.

Use all your senses just like you did back on the ridge, but pay special attention to developing clouds within reach if you're high, or to any possible surface triggers. If you're getting low your workload can be

quite demanding. Whilst searching for - or working - your low save, you need to be well aware of your surroundings in case you need to land.

But you start to bomb out big-style. It's time to land. If you are familiar with the terrain, landing out is easy; if not then site-assessment decisions need to be made pronto. Flat open field? No crop or rotor? Power lines? Near the road too? Perfect... touch down!

There's something special about landing out, a feeling of achievement or the sense of adventure. Whatever you feel you will remember your first flight over the back for a long, long time. Don't be surprised if you feel knackered - your brain has been working overtime. Take a few moments to reflect on your flight, grasp the experience and learn from it. Next time, that glider that you see passing annoyingly overhead as you pack away could be you!

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