

Soaring WITH THE HAWKS

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On any given blustery summer weekend, conditions being right, you will find a handful of enthusiastic, committed and passionate people soaring the skies. Couple passion and commitment with knowhow and a level-headed concern for safety, and you have the irresistible bunch called the Windy City Soaring Association in Hinckley.

I soon learned what these pilots were so passionate about when I took to the skies in a --glider. Before we took off, the members explained the technicalities of flight until my non-technical head was swimming. Then one member, Chris Marczewski, made it clear when he compared gliding to the soaring of a hawk.

“Look at how hawks fly,” he said. “They soar along on the wind, circling. They somehow don't perceive us as planes and fly right next to us.”

Hawks instinctively know what all glider pilots soon learn: how to get in the lift and stay there as long as they can.

“Gliding is a combination of the artistic and the scientific,” said Marczewski. “It's part mental, part physical. You're following the intangible.”



Elburn Herald reporter **Lynn Meredith** prepares to go up in a glider with members of the Windy City Soaring Association in Hinckley.

My pilot, chief flight instructor Mark Akerley explained just how intangible the art and science of gliding is. “You're flying by the seat of your pants --literally. You can feel it in your derriere. That's where the expression comes from,” he said.

Sure enough, I had a chance to experience just that feeling. When you're in a lift, you feel it ... just where Akerley said you would.

A lift is a thermal mass of warm air that is rising to displace the cooler upper air, explained Scott Wolfe, an experienced glider pilot. He calls it a "zero-sum game." If you've got a certain amount of air rising, you'll have the same amount of air sinking. The pilot's job is to find the rising air and minimize his time in the sinking air.

Once in the rising thermal air, as I soon discovered, the pilot flies slowly and banks steeply in order to stay in that air mass --just like a circling hawk.

The day looked to my inexperienced eye to be too windy, too cloudy and too much like rain. Not so, the members assured me as they strapped me into a parachute and gave me evacuation lessons. None of that bothered me until what came next: they asked me my weight. All my coy responses couldn't deter them from seriously wanting to know how much I weighed. As I muttered a figure somewhat lower than my actual weight, I was relieved to see that they added weights in order to balance the front, where I sat, with the back of the plane.

The clear hatch lowered over my head, the tow plane revved its engine, and the line connecting the glider to the plane straightened out as we started to move. We bounced and slid down the grass runway, gathering speed like a sled on snow. We actually lifted off before the plane did with my pilot adeptly following in formation behind the plane.

When the time was right, Akerley pulled the yellow knob and released us from the tow plane. The initial jolt soon smoothed out as we soared on our own power --or I should say, the power of the lifts that day.

"Today is a glider pilot's dream," Akerley said from his seat in the back of the plane.

We watched the dials with increasing excitement as we soared 1,000 feet per minute to 7,000 feet. In order to play these great thermals, Akerley banked the glider steeply and kept us circling --just like a hawk. Seeing the ground wasn't difficult when you're pitched as steeply as we were. The farms and clusters of houses in Hinckley grew farther away and smaller, giving a sense of peace and perspective without all the noise of an engine.

"If the weather were clearer, this high, you could see the Chicago skyline," Akerley said.

All the pilot has to fly the glider is a stick and rudder. It's a back-to-basics, natural kind of aviation.

"You're feeling the air all the time. It's intuitive," said Akerley.

I was about to find out. As Akerley coached me, I took hold of the stick and put my feet on the pedals. The glider responded to subtle pressure as I practiced turning right and left. After taking back control of the glider, Akerley thought I might like some dare devil tricks. It turned out he was right.

He pointed the nose way down, and the wind roared past us as we made a rapid descent. Then, he pulled the nose way up and banked so steeply this time that I thought I was upside down (I wasn't). Shades of fighter pilot footage were playing in my head when Akerley took out a plastic film case with an aspirin in it --not for any headache I might have -- but for a physics experiment.

“When I say 'now!', let go of the bottle,” he said as he instructed me to hold the case lightly against my thigh. In a steep turn, I let go and to my amazement the bottle stayed aloft, just like in space flight.

“Negative G's,” Akerley said. I couldn't say anything; I just cheered. Windy City Soaring Association is a club whose mission is to advance and promote the art, science and sport of soaring. It offers a complete program of education, training and advanced flying for the benefit of its members and the general public. To that end, the club offers rides to the public.

Mike Gunty is president of the association, which has 65 members. He explained that the club attracts student pilots, those people with no experience like me, power pilots and advanced glider pilots. After paying an initial fee and monthly dues, gliding lessons are free of charge. The club chooses members who will be a good fit and for whom it has the right resources.

“We are committed to giving them (student pilots) the training they need. It would be unfair if we don't have enough instructors,” Gunty said.

Gunty emphasized that there is always a risk in flying gliders and that the club's No. 1 priority is safety. “We're looking for the safest way possible,” he said.

The club also selects its members based on their commitment to being members of a club.

“We want people who are looking for the club environment,” Gunty said. “We count on all volunteers from the membership to help get things done.”

It's definitely not all hard work. The club holds monthly barbeques, cross country racing events, and a November chili fest.

So welcoming is this group that they encourage anyone to come out, take a glider ride and stay to watch the planes and gliders take off and land.

“Hanging around --that's what we do a lot of,” said member John Ehrisman. From April to Thanksgiving, you can drive to the Hinckley Airport three miles west of Hinckley on Route 30.

Check out their website at www.WindyCitySoaring.org, or give them a call at (815) 286-7200.