

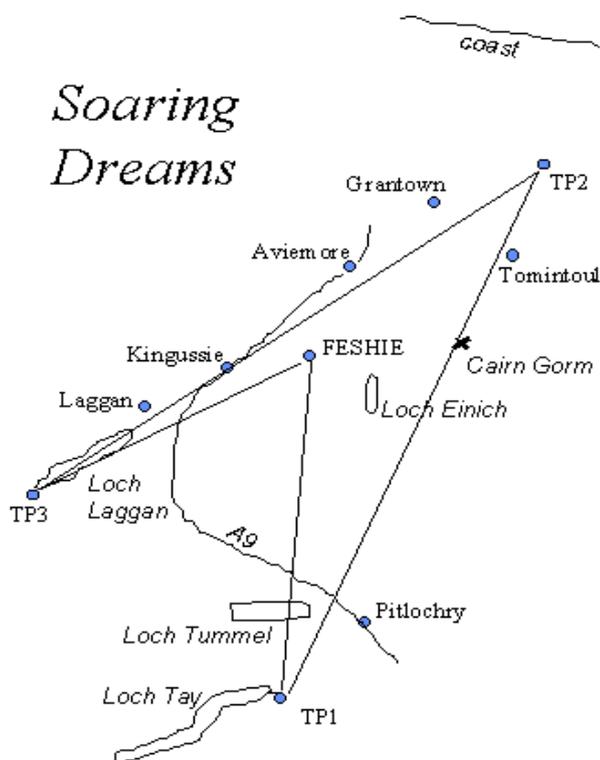
SOARING DREAMS by Phil Hawkins

(written in year 2000 when Phil and Fiona still lived in Oxfordshire)

Basically I am a thermal soaring pilot. There's nothing I like better than flying long distances over flat country. I love expeditions to the mountains for a change of scenery, and for the remote chance of a Diamond height, but I don't expect to do any serious cross-country flying on these visits.

Fiona and I have made two springtime expeditions to Feshiebridge, and on both occasions the weather has been blue and hot for at least part of the week. Last year I flew in blue thermals up to 5,500ft. This year I flew on four separate days and exceeded several personal records, accumulating more hours than on all previous expeditions to Feshie added together. On Monday 8th May, for example, I flew in heaving 8kt thermals up to a cloudbase that varied between 7,200ft and 7,800ft. Although cross-country tasks were set, clouds were limited to the area north of the site, and I merely ambled up to Inverness and came back.

I'll just go through that again in case you missed it. On a day with a 7 grand cloudbase I managed only 85km. It simply hadn't sunk in that weather like this should be used properly, regardless of whether the terrain below is flat or lumpy. It was a nice day's flying but nevertheless I felt that I had somehow lost out.



The following day also began blue, and I was convinced the weather could not possibly be as good, which just shows how wrong I can be. At least I was taking a lot more interest in the set tasks for the day. The biggest was a 307km quadrilateral, all of whose turning points appeared to be on the other side of very dark brown bits on the Scottish half million map. However there were two familiar faces at Feshie who were also enthusiastic, so I felt encouraged to mark up the task and think positively. My companions were Bob Sharman (ASW-20) and Jonathan Kingerlee (LS-7).

With juicy looking clouds forming over the local peaks, I drew pole position and was launched off first. The aerotow was a rollercoaster ride, and I pulled off at about 1,500ft in a steady 6 knot thermal. Over the radio we agreed that the safest start height was cloudbase, considering the unlandable Moon country en route to the first turning point. Like the day before, it seemed a long way up to cloudbase even after passing 5,000ft. I think I started the task at around 6,800ft.

The view heading south from Feshie was absolutely breathtaking. Your wildest soaring dreams cannot be better than this. Snow-capped mountains thousands of feet below stretching to a glowing horizon, with mysterious glimpses of the lochs between them here and there. A beautiful pure blue sky, paler and greener around the edges, and small flat bottomed clouds spaced conveniently into the distance. I didn't have GPS but this didn't matter. I cruised by compass over this awe-

inspiring terrain, tracing the hook shape at the top of the river Feshie, continuing southwards until the A9 and Loch Tummel came into view. I had an acute attack of "stay-up-itis" which caused me to hug the cloudbase at every opportunity, but I guess you would do the same, looking down on crisp snowfields, bare rocks and barren moorland, mile after mile of trackless heather and boulders. Imagine flying from Oxford to Northampton without seeing a single road or railway line, or any other signs of human habitation.

The first turning point was at Kenmore, just under 60km from Feshie, where I had to find a bridge at the eastern end of Loch Tay. Near Kenmore there were fields available, but at my height this was scarcely of interest. The clouds had slightly lower bases here, but I was still able to maintain about 5,500ft before heading north once more. The area around Loch Tay and Loch Tummel is very green, with steeply sloping forests seemingly frozen in the act of sliding gracefully into the blue water. What an incredible soaring experience this was.

Navigation on the second leg was no problem. In the distance, the biggest area of snow on the highest peaks just had to be the Cairngorm group, and this was right on track for the next TP. Cloudbases were steadily higher as I flew north, and over Glen Einich I passed 7,000ft for the first time that day. Loch Einich is only visible when close by, since it nestles below daunting cliffs at the back of the Feshie bowl. There was a much smaller loch high in a corrie to the east of Einich which was still frozen, with huge sweeping drifts of snow leading down to its icy shores.

Conscious of my two companions snapping at my heels I pushed on at high speed towards Aviemore and Granttown-on-Spey, where it was evident that sea air was beginning to affect cloud development. Although good clouds persisted over the high ground south of the Spey, everything was blue ahead. The last cloud was over the 2330 spot height to the east of

Grantown, which was at least 5 miles short of the turning point at Bridge of Avon. This cloud was fairly slow, but it lifted me to about 6,500ft where there were odd curtain clouds dangling from its ragged base. I flew along them a few times, hoping for lift from the sea breeze front, but this was a waste of time and height.

I set off into the misty blue, in ominously still air. I could see the turning point after a while, but I could also see very low cloud over the sea with motionless ripples in its upper surface. Sea fog! It was licking its way across the coast in eerie fingers, groping towards me up the Spey valley a few miles beyond the TP, flowing between woods and hedges. As I turned over Bridge of Avon, the radio indicated that Bob and Jonathan were catching up, but cannily they were detouring to stay over the higher ground to the south, apparently planning to approach the TP from the south-east. By the look of the clouds in that direction I wished I had done the same.

Arriving back over the 2330 spot height at 3,000ft QFE (about 1,500ft clearance) I began to scratch around for more lift, but there wasn't much to be had. On the direct track towards home the sky appeared blue and lifeless for many miles. Feeling a bit miserable, I diverted to the SSE over Tomintoul towards the nearest of the good-looking clouds, acutely aware that as my height slowly decreased, the altitude of the ground below was increasing at a much faster rate. There were landable fields in the valley bottoms near Tomintoul, but I was scratching over snowdrifts, heather, rocky slopes and white water streams.

After an anxious search under a large dark canopy of cloud, I found weak lift which gradually improved. I longed to get back to the sunshine on the other side of the ridge towards Loch Morlich. At the edge of the sunshine, more or less overhead the car park at the foot of the Cairn Gorm chairlift, there was a good strong thermal once more which gave me about 5,500ft. From here booming clouds could be seen on the last leg west of Feshie, and I set off on a long calm glide through the blue to reach them. Passing over Loch Morlich, Loch an Eilean and Loch Insh, I eventually contacted the lift over the hills just north of Kingussie. This was the best thermal of the day, hitting 10 knots at times and just brushing 8,000ft at cloudbase (8,850ft above sea level). It allowed me to cruise at 90 knots with full negative flap south-west towards Loch Laggan, ducking and weaving around other bits of cloud on the way. Again I was struck by the wildness of the terrain below, ancient forests of straggling pines, sharp ridges and few signs of human intervention.

On our previous visits the Laggan valley has acquired something of a spooky reputation. For example, one dark night we were followed along the Laggan road by a Land Rover with a large searchlight mounted on its roof, which was scanning the fields on either side of the road. Another day we saw a small plane which had landed in a remote field, then we were stopped at a Police checkpoint further along the road. They asked me if I had seen anything unusual, and barely had time to say thanks when I told them about the plane. They were gone in a cloud of dust. Strange things happen in Glen Laggan.

The specified turning point was the dam at the far end of the loch. I had been expecting a concrete structure, but on closer examination it appeared to be an earthen bank covered with gaunt old trees. Further towards Fort William the sea lochs sparkled in the afternoon sun, and the clouds showed signs of being fragmented by stable air from the west coast. Over the TP, however, there was another magnificent strong thermal, and I relaxed throughout the half-hour glide home.

This was easily my most spectacular 300km flight, and at 3½hrs also one of the fastest. Bob and Jonathan recorded similar times, finishing a few minutes after me. Oddly enough they both found the Laggan area much more difficult than I did. Two other gliders completed the task, the Scottish Gliding Association's ASH-25 and one of the local club members.

Feshie in the spring is different. At present I support the October visits but it can be so dark and damp at that time of year. In May the days are long and Scotland seems to be bursting with life. There are carpets of wood anemones, wild garlic and other flowers, symphonies of bird song in the mornings and wonderful views of the snow on the mountains. Autumn wave isn't necessarily better either - I had two wave flights that same week under azure skies, reaching 14,400ft and 16,100ft above the site on successive days. From that height the views of Skye and the other western Isles in a shimmering golden sea were absolutely stunning. If you are becoming disenchanted with the moist autumn weather, consider a spring expedition instead.

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