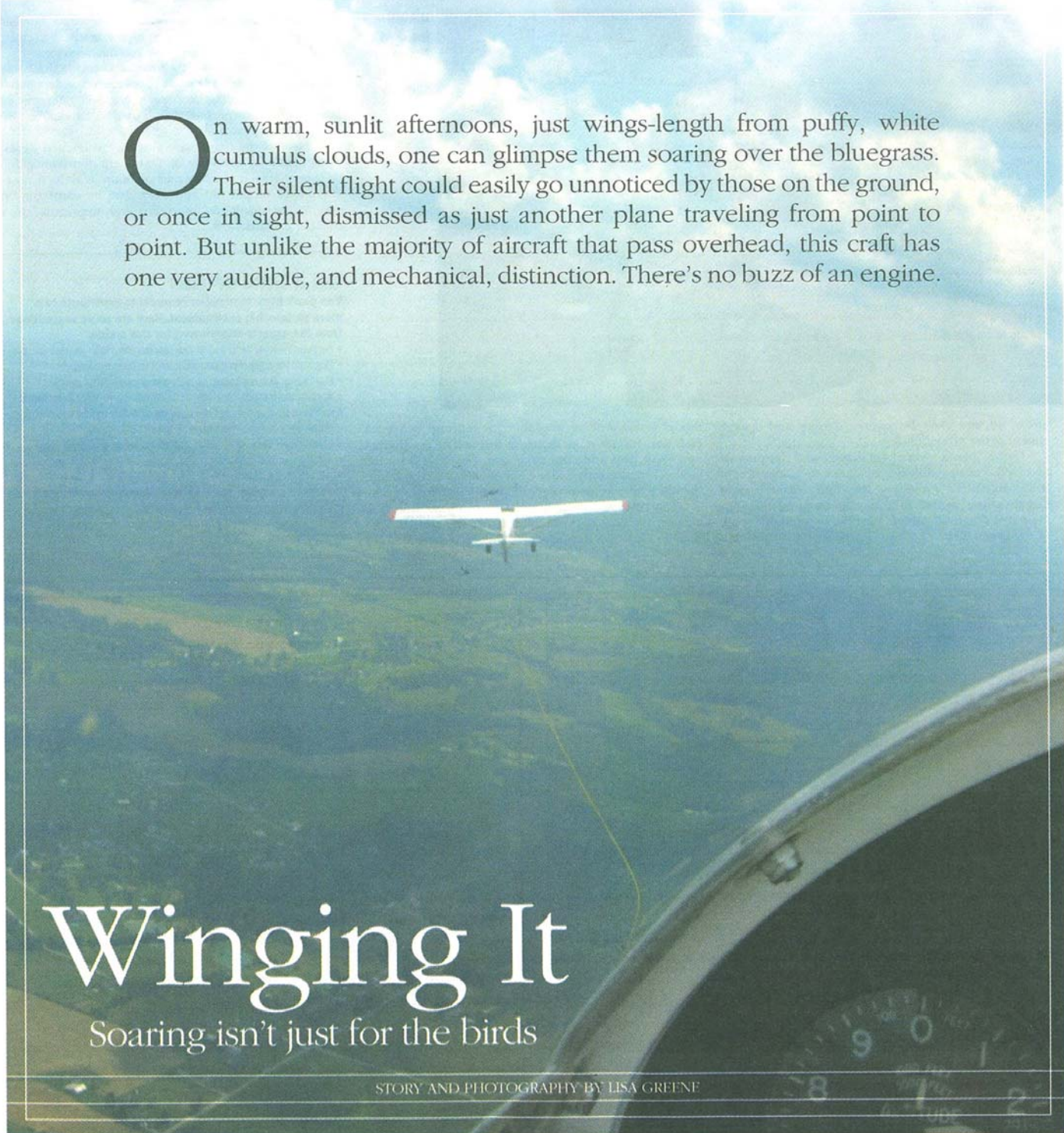


LSC Soaring Article

Chevy Chaser August 2007



On warm, sunlit afternoons, just wings-length from puffy, white cumulus clouds, one can glimpse them soaring over the bluegrass. Their silent flight could easily go unnoticed by those on the ground, or once in sight, dismissed as just another plane traveling from point to point. But unlike the majority of aircraft that pass overhead, this craft has one very audible, and mechanical, distinction. There's no buzz of an engine.

Winging It

Soaring isn't just for the birds

STORY AND PHOTOGRAPHY BY LISA GREENE

Gliders, or sailplanes, are motorless airplanes. Before the advent of our modern day aircraft, all flight was gliding flight (since the engine hadn't been invented yet).

"There's no sound because gliders don't have engines," explained Mike Carlson, president of the Louisville Soaring Club (LSC). "It's just you and the sky and peaceful silence."

Soaring flight lacks both the vibration and noise that accompanies the presence of an engine, filling the ears of pilots and riders with only the gentle whoosh of passing air, freeing the eyes to roam and enjoy the amazing view from above.

It's no wonder this silent sport has been fascinating flying fanatics around the globe since the early 1800s. Initial glider designs came from as far as Germany and Australia, and as close as California and Indiana. A century later, it was the Wright Brothers who took the art of gliding and solidified it as the sport it is today in the hills of Kitty Hawk, N.C. The brothers achieved powered flight in 1903 after attaching an engine to their best glider design, and in 1911 Orville Wright set a world duration record, flying his engine-less plane for 9 minutes and 45 seconds.

Since those early days, soaring has become quite the sport with clubs in nearly every state and annual glider meets held around the world. The Louisville Soaring Club (LSC) is Kentucky's only gliding organization and has been in operation since 1971. The club was founded by six soaring enthusiasts, including Bob Miles, who got the club off the ground by providing the training glider, the tug, tug pilot, and instructor. The club originated in Seymour, Ind., at Miles Field, then moved to Waddy, Ky., in 1983. It is currently based at the Nelson County Samuel's Field in Bardstown, Ky. To glide with the club requires a license, but to ride along is only \$40.

As there is no motor to initiate ascent, gliders can be



LSC's Schweizer 2-33,
a two-seater sailplane.

put into the air using several different techniques. LSC uses the aero-towing method. The sailplane is lifted into the air with the help of a tow plane (LSC uses a Scout 8GCBC), or tug, which pulls the small craft with a 200-foot rope. Once the plane reaches an altitude of 2-3,000 feet, the rope is released and the sailplane is free to ride the thermal currents that make up our atmosphere on an ideal gliding day.

There are three main sources of lift when it comes to soaring—ridge, thermal, and wave. In Kentucky and the rest of the Midwest, gliders use thermal currents to keep them aloft. Heat from the sun bounces off the ground, causing rising columns of warm air to head back up. These currents keep the gliders in the sky.

"It's always a challenge [soaring]; flying was fun but with a glider you don't know what is going to happen," said LSC member Lee Jarrard, who has been flying since

'73. "Cumulus clouds are good indicators of thermals—they're normally the real fat, puffy ones and on a good day you see them everywhere. Plus you have instruments that tell you if you are going up or down and after a while, you learn where thermals are strong or where they're dying out.

"One day back in the '70s I flew for five hours and 20 minutes; it just depends on how long the lift lasts," he added. "Then there's other days where you're back in 15 minutes, counting the time it took you to go up."

Carlson, who also flies planes for UPS, agreed that reading thermal shifts is very different from general aviation. "You have guys who have just started soaring, have never flown, and reading thermals is the hardest part. Reading the ground and the differences between where you expect the thermals to develop—over cities, over a green field versus a freshly mowed field, the topography,



clouds (wispy versus flat-bottomed)...It's a peaceful, yet demanding craft, and you have to be on your game."

For many of the LSC's 30 members, flying has been a lifelong hobby, whether flying with clubs, in the service, or professionally.

Jarrard said that as a kid, he was always fascinated with flying, so when he got an opportunity to join a flying club while in the Marine Corps, he couldn't pass it up. He flew in that club for two years, then years later, decided to try his hand at motorless flight.

"If you already have an airplane license, you just have to take a transition course—a 20-flight course, and a check ride (back then)," said Jarrard. "If you don't have any type of license, it takes much longer because you're starting from scratch."

Barry Curry just got his soaring license last October, although he started taking classes in '97. "I sorta drug my feet because I didn't have a commercial license. I just took my time," said Curry, who took his first soaring ride during his time with the Air Force. "I could fly solo but it wasn't until I passed my written test that I could take up passengers. My first passenger was my father and he just loved it. He's still asking me when we can go up again."

Herb Binder fell in love with soaring as a small child in Germany. "Soaring is a strongly pursued sport there; that's where my interest sparked. I watched a lot of soaring but I didn't have the opportunity to join until I came to the states in '65...Once that bug bites you, you can't let go."

Binder found a place to get started in Tennessee then moved to Kentucky and joined the LSC in '79. Since those early days, Binder has made up for his lack of early opportunity, taking to the skies as often as he can, and for as long as he can.

"I love the freedom, and depending on the conditions, I could stay up there all day—but eventually you get thirsty," said Binder, who built his own glider in '79 and still flies it today. "The freedom of flight and the changing conditions...you never know what to expect. I don't think anything compares to it. As long as I'm healthy, I'll be in the sky."

Binder, Carlson, and Curry all agree that although soaring may be challenging, it's not a dangerous sport.

"Pilots want you to believe it's scary and dangerous," said Carlson. "But we

never leave ourselves without an out. In Kentucky there's always a place to land."

Elizabeth Deener didn't find the sport the least bit scary when she first took to the airways—at the tender age of 15.

"It's incredibly peaceful, and more quiet than you think; it's just you and a glider and if you're lucky, some birds," said Deener. "I grew up around airplanes. My father flies, so I've been around aviation all my life. I joined the club and started taking lessons shortly after my 15th birthday, soloed, and got my license at 16. It was an interesting day because it was Father's Day and my father and I were both taking our private gliding tests. And I didn't have a learner's permit to drive yet."

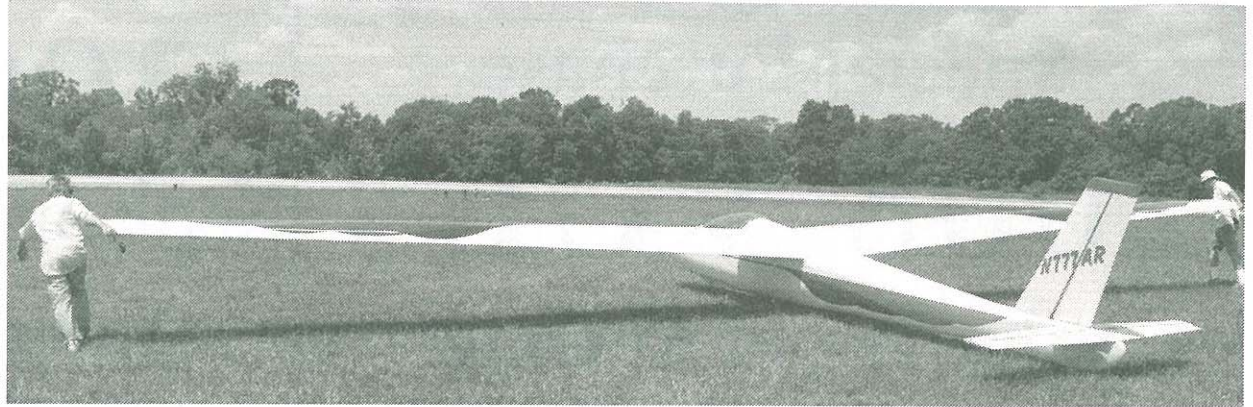
Now 13 years later, Deener still has just as much fun as she did as a kid, if not more. "It can almost be congenial," she said. "A month ago we had a really great day, and we had two or three gliders in one thermal. We were watching where we were and talking on the radios, [telling each other] where the good lifts were. You're still playing with each other when you're flying."

"We see who can get the highest," added Jarrard. "Herb will be up there and I'll fly under him, and he'll wisecrack 'the top of your glider looks real nice,' because he's above me."

After meeting some of the club's fun-loving members, corralling together on a bright Saturday or Sunday afternoon, cutting up and working together, it's easy to get drawn into their obvious enthusiasm for life, whether on terra firma or thin air.

"Having joined at 15, a lot of these guys are, in some ways, like uncles to me," said Deener. "Pilots can have an image of being eccentric, but they're no more eccentric than people who go boating every weekend."

"We've got a new batch, said Jarrard, "A real random



bunch—lawyers, doctors, photographers, engineers." Jarrard said that out of the 30 members, 10 are pretty active, six of which go up all the time.

"Why do I love soaring?" reflected Carlson, who is one of the six frequent fliers. "You have to quote Herb, the great soaring philosopher, 'every release is a vacation.' And he's dead on."

"It's really cool to sit down and say I made it to 6,000 feet or higher in a plane with no engine," added Deener.

My Gliding Experience

I've done some crazy things over the years. I've ridden the Drop Zone at King's Island more than once, and each time I truly hated it. I guess I thought eventually I would warm up to the idea of free falling. Needless to say, it never happened. Then I went rock climbing. That was pretty cool, but I still shied away from the higher cliffs. Next came skydiving, and I committed myself to that one for a story, clutching to the phrase 'it's for a story' until my feet landed on solid

ground. Needless to say, that was amazing, and one of the bravest things I have ever done. Then I went whitewater rafting, which was fun, so when I found the Louisville Soaring Club Web site, I knew this was my next big rush.

The drive down Bluegrass Parkway is always a nice, easy drive, and it wasn't any different this July Saturday. The weather was perfect, not too hot, not humid, and the sun was beating down on my arm hanging out the window. It took me about 50 minutes to get to Bardstown and soon I was pulling into the small Nelson County Samuel's Field.

From my car I could already see a small group of people out on the large stretch of airstrip, huddled around various aircraft. As I got closer, I noticed six guys and a couple ladies under a small, white tent, the chatter of chitchat and laughter getting louder. Within a minute of meeting everyone, I was at ease. I had walked into a group of jokesters.

Before long it was my turn to head up. My pilot was Herb Binder, club character and thermal-riding extraordinaire. He asked whether I preferred to sit in



The author with pilot and Louisville Soaring Club member Herb Binder.

Thanks to everyone at LSC. To learn more, visit soarky.org

the front of the two-seater sailplane or the back. I chose to sit up front (it has the best view) and we went about buckling me in.

Strapped in with the tow plane gently idling in front of us, we were ready to fly. We took off down the runway, bouncing and jostling on the sailplane's one big wheel. Then we were in the air and heading to altitude.

The ascent wasn't scary, but every once in a while we would hit a patch of dead air and the plane would fall for a split second. It caused my stomach to drop like it would over a small hill. Uncomfortable, yes, unbearable, definitely not.

As we got higher and higher, the needle of the altimeter reaching over '3' (meaning 3,000 feet), I heard a loud boom...and screamed. No worries though, it was just the release of the rope from the tow plane. I think Herb got a kick out of my high-pitched outburst so I laughed to relieve the pressure and scolded him for not warning me sooner. (Later I realized I had nothing to scream about, it's not like the engine blew!)

Looking down on the world below was breathtaking; looking around at the world above put me closer to my faith. I'd be lying if I said it wasn't a little unnerving when Herb tilted the plane from side to side to allow me a straight-down glance at the ground below. But other than that, it was like I forgot that I was supposed to be scared.

Gliding along to only the rush of moving air, looking over the nose of the sailplane to the great expanse of clouds and beautiful blue sky, the earth below stretching as far as the eye could see. I remember looking to my left and seeing

nothing but rolling hills and green, to the right, tiny patches of multi-hued land, like someone threw a quilt down from the sky.

Neither Herb nor I spoke very much, other than the occasional comment about the location of another glider or the airport. I didn't want to risk taking my seat-belt off but I was dying to catch a glimpse of what Herb was doing back there. So I took a picture over my head. Sure enough, he was sitting back, relaxed, one arm resting on the window (which was open, allowing a nice, cool breeze throughout the cockpit), a peaceful smile on his lips like we were cruising the strip on a comfortable summer day. Except we were 3,500 feet and climbing, coasting along the most miraculous highway I've ever been on.

Feeling the tufts of air take the plane up and down, up and down, it was exhilarating and probably the closest I will ever come to flying like a bird. I felt what a bird must feel, such freedom, such peace, such release—like nothing mattered. It was a completely different world and I see how these air addicts choose to spend their leisurely hours amongst its splendor.

Landing was easy and much smoother than I anticipated. We skirted to a stop not far from the other club members waiting on the field. Herb asked me if I was glad to be back on land. I replied, 'gliding was awesome, but yes. It's good to be back on solid ground.'

I don't think I'll ever be 100 percent comfortable in the sky...at least not until I sprout some wings of my own. But that's not to say I wouldn't take to it again. ☺

She had witnessed some of Herb's previous landings - Ed