



## Flying for bird-brains



*Judy Leden, GA pilot and three times World Hang Gliding Champion, wants to know why you haven't yet tried her sport*

I think I imagined the 'wing waggle', but when a Himalayan griffon vulture drew alongside me and fixed me with its beady eye, it felt like a salute of comradeship. The foothills of the highest mountain range on earth are a lonely though breathtakingly beautiful place to fly, so to be accompanied by a bird for fifteen minutes was a joyful and unforgettable experience.

This is hang gliding and it is the closest we can get to flying like (and, indeed, with) a bird. There is no cockpit, no glass or Perspex filter separates you from the world outside; the exposure is total. Control of a hang glider is direct as you instinctively lean the wing around the sky, rather than using the disconnected controls of stick and rudder. All your senses are engaged: your ears are your airspeed indicator, your eyes study the sky and the ground to find your next thermal and your nose can often confirm the source of the rising air – pine-scented thermals are common in the Alps, and there is no mistaking a thermal from a newly muck-spread field. After a while you develop what can only be described as a 'bird-brain' where you feel the movements in the air, transmitted through the hang glider, and can sense the presence of a thermal in the surrounding air, searching it out with the conviction of a bloodhound on a scent.

Learning to hang glide has never been easier. Although the number of schools teaching hang gliding has decreased, the choice of how to learn is wider. To fly on your

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**Above: a tandem microlight tow to altitude is the easiest method of learning  
Left: Judy Leden, indisputably the world's premier hang-glider pilot**

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own, away from the school environment, you have to pass the Club Pilot Certificate. The traditional way of learning on a hillside is certainly the hardest, requiring tenacity and strength in equal measure. Each short 'hop' is followed by a grinding slog back up the hill, inexperienced shoulders struggling to control a wing the size of a galleon sail which fights you every step of the way. The number of flights you achieve in a day is dictated by your resilience to pain and exhaustion. It is a time-consuming and energy-sapping business.

Tow training is the alternative, using either a static winch or the newer method of tandem aerotow tuition. If you elect to learn by winch towing, after learning the basics of hang glider control using a simulator, you will be towed at a height of 10 feet, your altitude being regulated by the winch operator, and the direction of the hang glider being monitored by tether lines attached to the wing. By the end of the first couple of days, you will be probably have reached the stage where you can be towed the length of the airfield at low level without tethers. When you land, you simply push the hang glider on its wheels, across the level field, back to the launch area.



Once you have mastered low level flights, you are taken higher, until you are confident to release the tow line yourself. As each stage is mastered the next level is introduced until you reach the nirvana of "high flight and circuit" where you get enough height to land back where you started from. No more walking – bliss!

The third way of learning, the new aerotow tandem instruction method, is the easiest of all, and allows you to experience the thrill of

high altitude flying right from the start. Lying side by side with an instructor, you are towed up by a powerful microlight to over 2,500 feet above the airfield. During the tow the student receives instruction on the positioning of the hang glider, with control being handed easily between instructor and student. After releasing the tow rope, the free flying tuition starts, with lessons on airspeed, stalls, turns and landing approaches as well as simulated emergency situations and the appropriate recovery. By the time you gain your Club Pilot (Aerotow) Certificate, you will have a few hours airtime (as opposed to only minutes using the hill or winch methods). As with other forms of aviation, there is no standard number of lessons to solo, it depends on each student's individual progress, but it usually takes a minimum of 13 tandem flights. This type of tuition is only available at one school in the UK: Airways Airsports in Ashbourne, Derbyshire.

The tandem hang glider is fitted with wheels, making hang gliding accessible to almost everyone, from children to great-grandparents, including those with a wide range of disabilities. My best moment as an

instructor was when my first wheelchair student flew solo last year. There is nothing to beat the sight of an empty wheelchair left behind as the occupant ascends to enjoy the freedom of the skies.

It is up to each pilot to decide where to go with hang gliding. Some elect to stay with aerotowing; some undertake the simple matter of converting to hill flying. The excitement and diversity of cross country flying appeals to many, but others just enjoy soaring above the countryside appreciating the view.

Hang glider design has moved on a long way from the flapping, poor performing machines of the past. Modern hang gliders are sleek, fast flexwings, or the new rigid-wing hang gliders which have a glide angle of 20:1. The simplicity of hang gliding has always appealed to me. Rigging is easily done by one person and once you have learned to fly, you can just drive to a flying site and launch when you want. There is no waiting for air traffic control, no hauling of aircraft from hangars, just the easy camaraderie of a group of like minded souls, intent on leaving the planet for a while.

**Top left: towed and tethered, tuition begins on a nice flat surface**

**Left: by Day Two you'll probably be flying at ten feet across the airfield**

**Below left: winch operator regulates height and tethers control direction**

**Below: Judy at altitude, not over Derbyshire**

I regularly fly several types of aircraft – light aircraft, microlights, paragliders, paramotors, as well as having dabbled in sailplanes and helicopters. I love all sorts of aviation, but for me, hang gliding will always be the most exhilarating form of flying. I always wanted to "fly like a bird" and the ultimate realisation of that dream is to soar, eyeball to eyeball with a bird as it accompanies you through the skies, accepting you as another bird in its own environment.

If you want to try hang gliding, be sure to visit the school before committing so that you can see them in action and speak to some of their students. I teach at Airways Airsports in Ashbourne, Derbyshire – the only school in the UK to offer the tandem aerotowing method, as well as winch training. You are welcome to



visit any time and see our set-up. Give us a ring on 01335 344308 to check whether we are training before you come. As with all aviation our sport is weather dependent, though with airfield-based training we are able to teach on twice as many days as we can on the hills. You can visit our website on [www.airways-airports.com](http://www.airways-airports.com). ■