



SKYLARK SURFS

Iain Russell took advantage of recent wave over Wooler to reach 20,500ft in his Skylark IV



I REMEMBER the day I saw my first glider as if it were yesterday; I was eight years old in 1984, when dad pulled the old Citroën over by the RAF Kirknewton airfield, near Edinburgh. I clambered up between the front seats and stuck my head out of the sunroof just as a Slingsby Cadet whistled overhead on finals. This was my first glimpse of a glider and of the Air Training Corps in all its youthful exuberance. As I hung there, goggle-eyed, I heard excited shouts from the glider's open cockpit, whizzing past above, as these "maniacs" buzzed us.

A seed was planted that day and I joined the Air Cadets when I was 14. I passed selection for a gliding course and went solo in 1992, aged 16. I went on to become an Air Cadet Instructor and, over the next 15 years, I completed nearly 5,000 launches while training other youngsters to fly. I feel privileged to have trained within the Air Cadet's system and to have flown with such superb instructors whose standards, for me, remain unsurpassed.

In the end I left to pursue other challenges

and to extend my gliding experience. I was warmly welcomed into the Borders Gliding Club at Milfield, Northumberland, along with my syndicate's Skylark IV. This was originally owned by Professor Frank Irving, who bought her as second off the Kirby Moorside production line in 1962. In the 1990s, she was sold to a bus-driver from Lothian Region Transport, which explains why she displays the fetching 'beige and scarlet' livery of Edinburgh's buses of that era.

I've enjoyed many good flights in the "Magnolia Queen" as my club mates call her, but none more exciting than the high wave flight of Sunday 26 June, 2011.

As I drove south across the border, a few wave bars hung above Kelso in the Tweed Valley, but at Milfield there were few signs wave was on the menu. The 9am briefing held more promise: "constant wind-direction up to 18,000ft"; "wind increasing with height"; "mountain lee-wave possible"; time to get moving!

After DI and positives, I towed the Skylark



CHEVIOT WAVE

to the launchpoint, prepared my kit and optimistically turned on the oxygen. The launch queue was frustrating, with eight gliders waiting to launch and only one tug on duty; the wave-window was closing rapidly. Finally my turn came, the Supercub roared across the grass and the Skylark leapt into the air within 30 yards; the aerotow was dog-rough until I released at 3,000ft above Wooler.

Initially I struggled to maintain height and since I was downwind of the site I could ill-afford to lose any; the Skylark is not famous for her performance into wind. Eventually I sniffed-out half-a-knot of gentle lift and flying short beats in the best areas, I slowly coaxed her upwards. Above 5,000ft the lift became smoother and I could relax a little. The GPS was crucial in mapping the wave for me, as I retraced my “breadcrumb trail”. Passing 10,000ft, I turned on the oxygen, took some photos and attempted one of the greatest challenges in gliding... ‘urination in harness!’

That little drama over, I could relax

and enjoy the views, which were simply stunning. The lift was only 250ft/min, but at 15,000ft I swapped my cannula for the full oxygen mask and radioed Milfield base to ask for the Northern Wave Box to be opened. Normally, we are only allowed up to FL 195 at Milfield, but Scottish Air Traffic Control can grant access up to FL 240. The club altitude record of 28,000ft, held by both Malcolm Parkes and Peter Johnson, was achieved in the 1970s when air traffic control was less restrictive; we shall not see those heights again.

I continued to climb, nervously checking my position and oxygen status all the time. Eventually I approached FL 195 and held below that level until permission was finally given for me to proceed. As luck would have it, the wave faded after just another 1,000ft, giving me a final altitude of 20,500ft! A personal best for me and not bad for Fred Slingsby’s 49-year-old ‘wooden-wonder’.

It was clear that the wave was fading so I just enjoyed the stunning views for half an hour: the Northumberland coast and

(Above, left to right): Iain Russell in his Skylark IV, waiting to make the most of wave over Wooler on 26 June; Skylark cockpit at 20,500ft; Skylark wing at 20,500ft (Iain Russell)

(Far left): the ‘spaceships’ arrive at Borders GC on a previous occasion. The prettiness and the usability of lenticulars are often different. Ragged crosswind streets can be booming and relatively easy to get in to – the pretty smooth ones like these are not necessarily that strong and may be mega-high and unreachable (Graham White)

■ Many other pilots had a remarkable day’s flying at Borders on 26 June, reaching heights of 10,000-17,500ft. Iain Russell had not bothered to take a logger with him on his 20,500ft flight, as he already has Diamond height. However, the other three pilots who did take a logger found themselves placed 1, 2 and 3 on the National Ladder

✈ Holy Island basked in sunshine to the east, while the Lake District and the Solway Firth could just be seen in the west. However, I decided to heed the CFI's advice to: 'set a goal and go somewhere'; it would be a shame to waste all that height! Dropping out of the wave box, I set off north-east towards Dunbar on the East Lothian coast. This took me through entirely uncontrolled airspace, one of the great benefits of flying at Borders Gliding Club – we are literally in the middle of nowhere. It's funny the 'eventualities' that come to mind when one is really high...like:

"If I were forced to bale out now, 10 miles inland, with this strength of north-westerly wind at 19,000ft, I'd probably end-up drowned, five miles offshore in the cold North Sea. So, would it be best to free-fall 10,000ft before pulling the ripcord?"

The very thought sent a shudder down my spine, reminding me to keep a VERY good lookout – my scan-cycle suddenly became even more intense!

Approaching the East Lothian coast at Dunbar, the Bass Rock rose 350ft from the sea, as a gleaming white pillar. Tourists often think this is 'bird-guano' but it is actually sunlight reflected from the feathers of 60,000 nesting gannets, crammed onto just seven acres of rock. A great wall of cumulus blocked further progress north and so, just 30 miles from home at 14,000ft, I decided to call it a day, and banked south-west towards Milfield. However, my assumption that a 33:1 glide angle and 14,000ft of altitude would allow me a straight glide home was over-optimistic. There was a strong headwind and, although the ASI indicated 60kts, the GPS showed only 30kts ground-speed. Not good in a Skylark IV, which loses height rapidly at the nose-down attitude required for 60kts. Suddenly, my 'relaxed flight' seemed likely to end in a farmer's field. I consoled myself that, with those Slingsby airbrakes and high-wing-shoulders, I had the best possible glider for a field landing.

The homeward glide was touch-and-go all the way; my altitude dribbled away like water down a drain. I reassured myself that, with hundreds of nice flat fields to choose from, there was really no problem; still, it would be embarrassing to have to call the club to: 'bring the trailer!' Fortunately, the Skylark's 19-metre wings carried me safely home and into the circuit at about 1,000ft.

Given the rough air on approach and a 30kts wind, I opted for the Skylark's trademark "Khe-San" approach. Starting finals half-a-field back at 800ft, I crossed the

boundary at 400ft and the 'wooden plank' airbrakes guided me gently to earth after four and a half hours in the air. I was a little tired from the intense concentration, but happy as a sandboy. I unlatched the canopy, took a few deep breaths as I released the straps and savoured the smell of new-mown grass. As I loosened the chute harness, I wondered how different life might have been, if dad had not parked the car at RAF Kirknewton all those years ago?

If we had not been buzzed by a couple of maniacs in a Slingsby Cadet, I may never have joined the Air Cadets, might never have learned to glide, would not have just enjoyed one of the best wave-flights of my life, and memories that I will treasure forever. I felt a surge of gratitude to Squadron Leader Allan Gillespie of 661 Volunteer Gliding Squadron, who sent me solo all those years ago, and to my instructors and fellow pilots at Borders who keep this superb airfield in operation, enabling us to enjoy glorious days like this.



Iain Russell joined the ATC at 14 and soloed at 16. He later taught many cadets to fly at 661 Volunteer Glider Squadron, RAF Kirknewton. Iain now flies at Borders Gliding Club in Milfield, Northumberland in his Slingsby Skylark 4, which he co-owns with three others. He currently has 200 hours' experience in paragliders, and over 700 in conventional gliders. Iain has a Silver C and his Diamond height



Iain Russell reached 20,500 feet on a flight in his Skylark IV that lasted four and half hours and took him from Wooler to Dunbar and back again. He took this photo over the Berwickshire coast