

Crowd Conscious



“In addition to looking for immediate traffic, we should all be anticipating where pilots are going to be, not just where they are.”

by Ryan Voight and Rob McKenzie

Flying in traffic can be pretty harrowing if you, or the people you're flying with, don't know how to make it work. Here are some tips for both hang AND para pilots to ease some tension on high-traffic days.

RIGHT-OF-WAY/RIDGE RULES

It is astonishing how many pilots don't know all of the right-of-way rules. Equally astonishing are the pilots who FORCE the rules and fly straight at other pilots, because they feel they have right-of-way. The right-of-way rules are a guideline, which should be followed as much as pos-

sible, as long as it is safe to do so. Here is a summary of the rules:

When traveling opposing directions (head-on), pass to the right (just like driving a car). When a ridge is present, pilot on the “inside” with the ridge to his/her right has right-of-way. Altitude-wise, the lower pilot always has right-of-way.

First pilot in a thermal sets the turn direction. When entering a thermal with other pilots already in it, you must yield to them (don't push them out of the thermal). If multiple pilots are in the same thermal, the lowest pilot sets turn direction (and higher pilots must match).

Always, always, ALWAYS clear your turns. See, be seen, and avoid.

If you are overtaking someone going



A COLLABORATION

by Ryan VOIGHT & Rob MCKENZIE

the same direction as you, pass between the pilot and the ridge (as long as it is safe to do so).

Do not pin other pilots against the ridge. If a pilot is between you and the ridge, make sure he/she has enough room to turn out away from the ridge if he/she wants or needs to.

Consider how the other pilots are able to see you with respect to glare from the sun. Is the sun low in the sky? Is he looking toward the sun when looking toward you? He may be looking directly at you but not see you. Don't assume he sees you.

LAUNCHING

We all have our own routine we follow

before launching. Although we all do it differently, there are certain things we know need to be in our routine. A hang or hook-in check, for example, is something we all do at one point or another before actually launching. Another example is checking conditions—wind direction, velocity, etc. But after completing our long list of pre-launch steps, when we see a beautiful cycle that we absolutely positively don't want to miss, many of us forget to look UP and check for traffic. Hang glider pilots tend to be looking straight ahead during launch and might not remember to check right or left. Paraglider pilots tend to either look up at their wing or look down at the ground as they lean forward and perform an aggressive launch.

[above] Light traffic on the south side at Point of the Mountain, Utah | photo by Ryan Voight.

No matter what we fly, I think we can all agree that checking for traffic is a critical step we all need to incorporate into our launching habits.

In addition to looking for immediate traffic, we should all be anticipating where pilots are going to be, not just where they are. On a small ridge site, once someone flies by to the left, we know they're going to turn around and pass by again to our right. And if you go back to the ridge rules, when they have the ridge to their right, they will be on the "inside" of the pattern, closer to the hill. It makes much more sense to wait until they pass to



the right before launching, because, now, when they turn around, they will be on the outside of the pattern, away from the hill, giving you room to get into your harness and get into the pattern yourself.

[above, diagram 1] The pattern at Point of the Mountain.
[below, diagram 2] Typical landing pattern [right] Traffic |
photo by Ryan Voight.

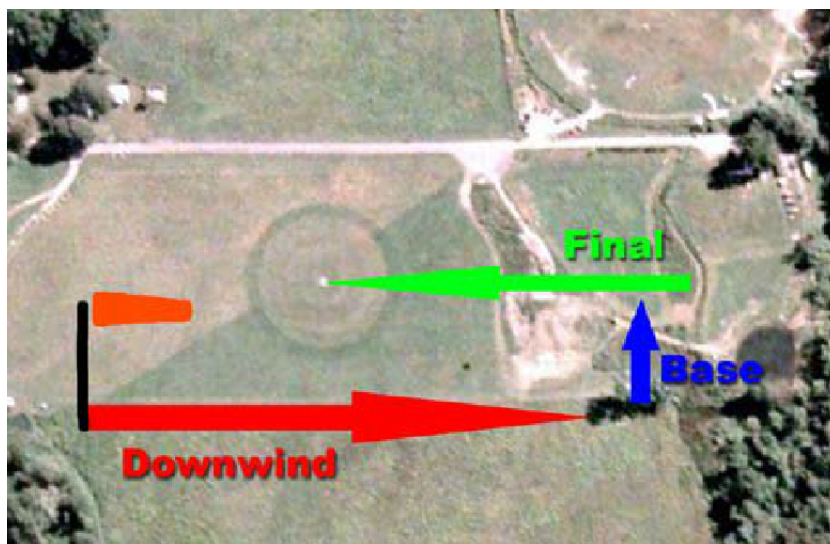
If you're the pilot in the air, and you see a pilot who appears to be launching, keep your eye on him/her. Better yet, try to communicate with him/her! You can yell that you are clear, or you can wave him/her into the air, letting him know that you see him/her, and you'll give him room so he can join you. So much of flying crowded sites is sharing and being considerate

of others... and sometimes doing those things requires putting some thought and effort into it.

FLYING A PATTERN

For our purposes, flying a "pattern" simply means flying an established and predictable flight path. At a ridge soaring site, the right-of-way "ridge rules" establish a pattern that resembles the illegitimate stepchild created if you crossbreed an oval and a figure-eight (see diagram 1). If you followed the ridge rules to the letter, it would actually be an oval. But it's a pretty rare site when pilots are turning toward the hill rather than away from it. So one end of the oval becomes more of a figure-eight, where pilots will drift in closer to the hill before turning out, away from the hill. Note that the shape and location of this eight will vary from site to site. Diagram 1 represents the pattern at the South Side of Point of the Mountain, UT.

Another place flying a "pattern" can be helpful is when coming in to land. The specific pattern may vary from site to site, but a good example is an aircraft approach.





An aircraft approach involves a downwind leg, a base leg, and a final. In effect, you are boxing one side of the field you plan to land in (see diagram 2). If you are landing at the same time as others, try to land more towards the side of the field where you did your aircraft approach, leaving the other side of the field for the other pilot(s) who are also landing. Once you have landed, check for traffic and clear the landing area so that others have room to land.

One site that has made phenomenal use of aircraft approaches is Crestline, CA. At this site, hang gliders do a left-handed aircraft approach (making left-handed turns), while paragliders do a right-handed aircraft approach. This way, the different airspeed and glide slopes are not an issue, and each type of wing has half the landing area at its disposal. I have been to many sites with landing areas two-to-three times as large, and far fewer pilots flying there, and things still don't go nearly as smoothly—a testament to their system. Of course, each site has its own intricacies and protocols of dealing with them, so be sure to talk with an experienced local before flying an unfamiliar site.

CLEARING YOUR TURNS

Everyone has heard of clearing turns. The simple principle is to look **BEFORE** you turn. If you want to turn left, look left and make sure you are clear to do so. But, in reality, clearing turns isn't looking once and seeing you are clear. You look first, then continue to look as you initiate the turn and continue looking throughout the turn. In 360's, you should be constantly clearing your turns! Speaking of 360's, it is not uncommon for pilots to have their eyes glued on their instruments while turning in lift. Remember, if you're looking at your vario or GPS, you're **NOT** looking where you're going!

COHABITATION

In the last segment, we discussed some areas that require a bit more attention when flying crowded sites. Crowded sites can be extremely challenging, and sometimes frustrating, and that's when it's only hang gliders or paragliders in the air. Once the two start sharing the same airspace, things can get interesting (to say

the least).

If you've been in this sport for any length of time, you've probably noticed a bit of sibling rivalry between hang gliding and paragliding. Pilots of each discipline are not always kind to those who fly a wing different from their own. So much of this hostility is caused from simple misunderstandings of the "other side."

I hope to educate both sides in hopes that we can learn to fly together in harmony.

AIRSPEED

Even Helen Keller could tell you that hang gliders fly faster than paragliders. So what? Let's put some thought into how the speed differential can raise hell when flying together. First, when flying a pattern in ridge lift, hang gliders are going to not only have to pass people going the other direction, but also because of their faster airspeed, they're going to pass paragliders going the same direction. This can be nearly impossible if the outside leg of the pattern is too close to the inside leg. When sharing the air with hang gliders,

“If a paraglider pilot is looking to where he will be in 30 seconds, he is not going to be looking nearly as far in front as a hang glider pilot looking at where he will be.”

the oval pattern needs to open up, creating a “middle” lane, so they can easily pass the paragliders going in the same direction, without being forced into flying head-on into opposing traffic.

Another issue that the different airspeeds create is how far ahead a pilot of each aircraft tends to look or plan. If a paraglider pilot is looking to where he will be in 30 seconds, he is not going to be looking nearly as far in front as a hang glider pilot looking at where he will be.

So what?

Well, if a situation arises where a hang glider and a paraglider are traveling on a collision course, the hang glider pilot is going to see this first and will likely react. This can lead to a feeling among hang glider pilots that paraglider pilots fly straight at them and expect them to move. While there may be some bad apples out there, I don't find this to be the case. More than anything, it's just a big misunderstanding! Luckily, it's a misunderstanding that's easy to fix. By writing this article, we've brought attention to the issue. Next time you find yourself sharing the air, make a point of looking out farther ahead than you're used to, and planning farther ahead than you're used to. I think you'll find it makes flying in traffic quite a bit more bearable.

PITCH AND ROLL STABILITY

This will hopefully be a eureka moment for all of us who frequently share the air with our free flight brethren. We all know that hang gliders have a lot more pitch control than paragliders do, right? So what?

When someone flies closely above or below a hang glider pilot, he/she can adjust his pitch to open or close the vertical distance between the two. In a paraglider, having a pilot close above or below you can be nerve racking, because there is very little that can be done about it. In a paraglider, if you have a pilot right below you, and you hit some sink (or they hit some lift), you can find yourself in a bad spot with no good way out. In addition, paragliders typically experience turbulence in the form of pitch, with the wing slowing back behind their heads, and then surging forward. Even with the best active piloting in the world, it's difficult to completely eliminate these pitch variations.

Hang gliders, however, typically experience that same turbulence in the form of getting a wing lifted, rolling the glider. That same hang glider pilot who didn't mind having traffic just above or below becomes extremely nervous about having traffic close to either side. Again, even the best hang glider pilots have a difficult time completely eliminating these variations in roll. Due to a paraglider's inherent roll stability, they tend to be much more comfortable flying wingtip-to-wingtip with other pilots (as long as there's no one above or below them!).

While we're looking for similar flying conditions, flying at the same sites, with the same end goals (getting high and/or going far), some of the inherent differences in our aircraft greatly affect what we need or want from the others we fly with. While I have tried to raise some key points and trigger further thought on the topic, the only way we can continue learning is to further discuss what we like or dislike from the other pilots we fly with. With an open mind and some effort turned towards education, we can learn to happily coexist. Getting along with the “other side” will not only make flying more enjoyable for us all, but I guarantee you'll find yourself flying more often! And you'll suddenly have a whole new group of friends to go on flying trips with! 🇺🇸

[right] Working the North Side, Point of the Mountain, Utah | photo by Ryan Voight.

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