

## FLY LIKE an EAGLE

By David Drabble

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After carefully pouring over Saturday's temp trace which had shown potential for exceptional height gains over 10,000 feet, we set out early Sunday morning to my in laws farm at Beverley. The forecast was for 32 degrees on the ground which was three degrees hotter than the day before! Our hopes were high that today's temp trace would be even better.

The day started with a cool gentle breeze and it was clear that there was no need to be in the air too early. Saturday's temp trace had shown an inversion at three thousand feet which needed at least 26 degrees on the ground before any decent heights could be made.

After helping some novices earlier, I took off at about just before midday and soon discovered the inversion was still there. Either the temperature hadn't increased enough or the inversion had built up considerably from Saturday - I suspect a combination of the both.

I was lucky to get away, the tow only took me to 690' as the wind changed suddenly from a light easterly to a moderate northerly. The air was scratchy but quite buoyant and I slowly climbed away from the paddock leaving the others below to re-route the toelines and move the gliders.

Northerlies always seemed much harder to get away in, decreasing the likelihood of me flying with anyone that day. So, as all good hangies do, I stayed in with the lift and drifted off down wind.

It took at least 15 minutes before I was bouncing around at an inversion of 3,500'. The air was fairly smooth here, with large patches of very gentle lift that was too light to turn consistently in, but good enough climb at 30-50 feet per minute if you flew in straight lines or very flat 360's. The sink between thermals wasn't too bad, but at that height you couldn't take too many chances.

Beverley wasn't far off so I turned down wind in the general direction of the airfield (the sailplane pilots were always flying on the weekends making it much easier to locate elusive spring thermals). Just short of Beverley I noticed that the wind appeared to be dropping. At the same time a few cu's appeared overhead at around 6-7,000 feet. Was the *inversion* was breaking?

I topped up at the outskirts of town in another light but steady thermal... still only managing to get to around 3000'. The inversion obviously was still quite thick and only letting the very best thermals through. With this in mind I decided that if I was to bomb it would be prudent to do it closer to home. I headed off to Geraldine's folk's farm (about 12 kms away). It was quite easy punching back into a breeze which was dropping rapidly. There were still large patches of lift about which allowed me to make it back to the farm, only losing a couple of thousand feet.

I looked at my vario - 910 feet!! I thought that a dark red paddock might help me out and sure enough my Flytec starting making the sound that was music to my ears. It only read 120 fpm, but that was plenty. I could make steady turns without any holes or rough patches in the air.

At about 1900' I noticed a wedgy off my starboard wing and about 20 feet above me. I kept going, even more determined to improve my climb rate and keep up with my feathered friend.

Two thousand five hundred! Another wedgy! I hoped they were friendly and kept turning...

Three thousand. I couldn't believe my luck. A third wedge-tail!

I noticed something odd about this one and dragged my eyes from my vario and took a second glance. To my dismay, I noticed a plastic bag (like a Coles shopping bag) hooked around his talons. At about the same time, as if he noticed me staring, the eagle moved in much closer ... by now we were all at the top of the thermal, 4200 feet. The inversion was finally breaking!

My attention quickly returned to the eagle with the plastic bag and my mind raced as to why he had a bag wrapped around his foot and how I could possibly help get it off? It made me angry as to why humans leave rubbish lying around for beautiful birds like eagles to become tangled in. While I pondered at how helpless I was to assist the Wedge-tail, I became aware that the other two eagles had moved in very close too.

I watched intently as the largest of the three (about 7 - 8 feet across and also the one with the

plastic bag) swept right in front of me, no more than fifteen feet away. He moved from my left tip right across my path effortlessly as if to show me the bag attached to his talons. After capturing my attention *completely*, he rolled off to the right taking his companions with him. I looked back over my shoulder in complete disbelief as I saw him release the plastic in some light lift - allowing it to waft about in the gently rising air.

The bag wasn't caught after all, he was just clutching it!!! Just as I asked myself why ... the eagles showed me...

The largest, after releasing the bag moved away leaving his companions about 50 feet above. The next largest rolled over and dived upside down at the bag swooping and catching it in his talons, then pulled sharply up and released it where he had caught it.

The next dived sharply striking the bag with his right wing, rolling and releasing it from his wing in one motion...

For the next half an hour I was privileged to witness one of the finest aerial displays of my life. The three birds *played* with that bag, losing no more than a thousand feet the whole time. To my surprise they tolerated my presence on the outskirts of their game, allowing me to share their lift and occasionally even dive bomb the plastic bag in turn with them.

After a while I felt as though I was intruding and headed back to the farm once again. As if in a gesture of farewell, the eagles left the bag and followed me as close as twenty feet behind me. Perhaps at this point I witnessed the most perfect barrel roll ever executed. The largest of the three was about six feet below and about a foot in front of one of his companions when he proceeded to perform a slow and faultless barrel roll. His wings remained fully extended and he appeared to lose no height. While upside down he looked up at his companion as if lying on an invisible bed of air then looked at me and continued his manoeuvre until he had regained a normal flying attitude.

When I landed, some thirty or so minutes later, I still wore a smile a mile wide. This flight will definitely be a memory that will be long cherished and remembered.