

# The Giant Dust Devils of Dalwallinu

*An account of the WA Open Distance Record by Phil Wainwright*

Stumbling out of my room I made a quick assessment of the weather through half opened, sleep-ridden eyes. Cold with scungy looking clouds scooting past at 15 knots about 800 feet from the ground.

A red MX sports car pulling into the car park was enough to distract me from an immediate return to bed. It was Mark "Bomber" Thompson in one of his sanguine moods. "Today is a record day" he declared as he grabbed his laptop computer from the passenger seat.

The Perth temp trace revealed a solid inversion at 2000' which should break when the temperature reached 21 degrees. By the time it peaked at 27 degrees we should have clouds with thermals going to 8500'. Also in our favour was a 30km/h sou'easter ... *if* we could get safely off the ground.

Shaun Wallace reported some nasty turbulence below 1000' during his trike flight from Wyalkatchem to the paddock at Korrelocking. Despite this we all set about rigging our gliders. The wind was still a little strong, but at least the cloud cover had begun to break apart.

Bomber was first to launch at 11:45am. It was still very cold and there were no obvious thermal cycles. Daryl Speight was next off followed by me at 12 noon. Shaun only managed another two aero tows in the "Little White Mountain" before he had to call it off due to safety concerns.

Conditions were marginal at best, with very light and broken lift to 3000'. I switched off my radio to concentrate on staying aloft. I had bombed out on the previous 2 days in similar conditions and was keen to make amends.

The West Australian wheat belt is strewn with large salt lakes due to 150 years of over-zealous tree-clearing. As I approached the first of these I noticed Bomber on the ground below me. He had reached the Cowcowing Lakes too low and was unwilling to chance a crossing.

A light thermal triggered by the lake edge was enough to drift me across the 10km or so of tiger country. Unable to climb much higher than 3000', it was a case of flying at min-sink between thermals, utilising the wind to get to the next trigger.

An hour into the flight I had covered just 39km despite a 30km/h tail wind. Down to 800' I needed a lucky break.

During every cross country flight there are make-or-break decisions. Some are rational, others pure chance. It was the latter that got me out of trouble this time. Approaching a tree line I could follow it left or right. I guessed left.

I slowly climbed out to cloud base at 3500' and turned on my radio just in time to hear that Daryl hadn't been so lucky. He'd made it across the lakes, but failed to claw his way back up in the tatty lift.

The Rabbit Proof Fence Road scores a 100km line diagonally across the road grid. To the west is a complex network of roads, railway lines and wheat silos. To the east, a wide band of salt lakes borders millions of acres of arid green scrub land.

After another hour of scrappy climb-outs I reached "Rabbit Road." The clouds were beginning to form up nicely and align themselves with the wind. Each of the last two climb outs yielded an extra 500 feet with cloud base now at 4500'.

A pair of wedge tailed eagles cruised in from Kalannie. The younger of the two seemed delighted by the appearance of a huge shiny white bird. A game of cat and mouse ensued. After ten minutes or so the young raptor took pity and led me into a 500-up core, never deviating from a position 3 metres in front of my left flying wire.

Gordon Marshall called in from about 10km behind me. He had reached "Rabbit Road" with Phil Knight in close pursuit. Dave Wellington was some 20km further back after organising a ground tow.

The cloud streets were well defined by now. Climbs were improving rapidly enabling me to start cutting west across the streets towards the Great Northern Highway. The wind had changed to a straight southerly, but any disadvantage had been nullified by the smooth consistent lift and rapidly rising cloud base.

Dalwallinu is my old stomping grounds. I've spent many an afternoon spiralling out of the "Jones West" tow paddock. It was here that the late Andrew Humpheries had taught me to fly some 12 years prior. As I passed overhead I saluted "The Shade" and hit 700-up lift.

It was as though Dalwallinu had been awaiting my return after a 9 year absence. The scene from 7000' was awesome. Three huge cloud streets twisted and billowed northward with massive 3000' high dust devils ripping across the ground beneath them. 3 hours and 130km into the flight I knew it was "game on" for the open distance record.

Progress was swift. Before long I had gone past Wubin and was approaching Buntine. I've never been much of a cloud flyer – diving at dust devils is much more my style.

Chasing down the monsters was a lot of fun! Vertigo kicked in as the perspective changed from looking across at them, to staring straight down the twisting funnel to the ground below. As the base encountered tree lines and fences it would explode into a cloud of debris before miraculously pulling itself back together into a tight vortex.

The dust devil climb-outs continued at roughly 10km intervals. I'd top out at 7000' then hit the next one at 4000' – about 1000' above the dust column. The lift was smooth and wide averaging 700-up and peaking at over 1000-up.

By 4:30pm I was 8500' over Perenjori and 225km from home. Gordon had landed 166km out near Maya. Phil Knight was still in the air pushing for a PB in his lime-green SX. Dave had shot past Phil and was still about 30km behind me.

At 5:15pm I cruised in above the Morawa silos. I had 4000' under me, 261km behind me, and a new WA declared-goal distance record in the bag. The previous mark of 192km had been jointly set exactly 2 years ago to the day by Bomber, Daryl, Dave and I.

I could see the sea-breeze pushing in from the south west, the drought ravaged top-soil being swept before it.

Heading north along the highway I weaved desperately from trigger to trigger ... buildings, trees, rocks, dams – anything that might cut free a late afternoon thermal.

Only 600' from the ground, I was seconds from committing to a landing. As I over-flew a small stand of trees I felt a few promising bumps. A couple of full turns in some 50-up and I was away again. Before long I was slicing through silky 200-up on my way to 6000'.

Dave and Phil were not so fortunate, reporting their landing positions as 236km and 212km respectively. Phil was over-the-moon with his personal best effort.

During my 25 minute climb-out I had time to reflect on Ray Chatfield's epic 290km flight in 1984. Since the day Ray stepped from the edge of Mt Bakewell in his Skytrek Probe much has changed.

Today we have Dragonfly tugs, topless gliders, slick control frames, cigar harnesses, GPS and glide computers. Despite these developments Ray's flight had stood unbeaten for 18 years as the WA open distance record.

I reached over to my GPS (where Ray's map holder and bar-mitts would have been) and checked the distance to the Korrellocking paddock ... 292km.

The long climb-out had pushed me to the edge of the road network forcing me to cut cross-wind towards the highway. A forested area around the Canna silo prompted another course change. Now below 2000' it was difficult to distinguish roads from farm tracks. I picked out some buildings in the distance and arrived with a few hundred feet to spare.

At 6:15pm I touched down in a 25 knot sea-breeze and a stinging blast of top-soil. I'd flown a straight-line distance of just over 313km. The last 40 minutes of sunlight was spent carefully de-rigging my magnificent Airborne Climax.

By 9:30pm I had been picked up and was on my way back. Krista proved she was the best pick-up driver in the world by conjuring up a meal of cold chicken Kiev and champagne.

Today had been a remarkable day full of personal triumphs and visual highlights. I had scraped low across salt lakes, soared high with eagles, skimmed along cloud streets and chased the giant dust devils of Dalwallinu.





