

Madness On The Precipice

by Bill Cavanaugh

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What is in last place on your list of favorite R/C sailplane hobby things? Mine is a mid-air. This event can spoil your day, for sure. So, what do you think of pilots who deliberately try to have mid-airs? Crazy, wouldn't you say? Well, I finally visited Chickies Rock, and that's just what they do there. It's called "combat," and they try to knock each other out of the sky. It's not quite as loony as it sounds, however, because they fly little slope soarers that are practically indestructible. They are made of tough foam taped together with glass strapping tape; they literally bounce when they crash. Of the dozens of crash landings I witnessed, not one was damaged enough so that it could not be picked up and flown again.

Chickies Rock is a Pennsylvania state park just East of the Susquehanna river off of Rt 30. Cross the bridge, exit immediately onto 441 North, go about half way up the mountain maybe less than a half mile and turn left when you see the sign. It is about one hour from the intersection of the Baltimore beltway and 1-83 North.

There is a modest grassy area, large enough to land on, and about fifty yards of space opening on the steepest natural cliff I have ever seen. I would guess that it is considerably less than 45 degrees. Engineer Russ

Bennett explained to me that loose material such as sand has a minimum angle, below which it will collapse. But packed material such as rock which is what Chickies Rock is, mainly can have a smaller angle. Anyway, pilots working their way down and up the face of the cliff to rescue their downed sailplanes, hanging on the scrub bushes, look like they are engaging in one of the more dangerous activities of our hobby. Steve Pasierb actually galloped down the slope. Hope we don't have to visit Steve in the hospital someday.

Chickies Rock is an interesting place in that R/C sailplanes planes are not the only occupants of the slope lift. While I was there several turkey buzzards came soaring along the cliff below our level. This is the first time I looked down on a flying turkey buzzard.

I arrived about 11:00 AM and judged the brisk wind coming up the slope about marginal for flying my electric Spectra, while the other guys stood around grouching about not having enough wind to fly their little demons. The wind, I was told, comes up to speed early afternoon. I did get one flight in before the wind really came up, and I'll have to admit it was fun working the lift along the ridge. Soon the sky was full of sailplanes flying every which way right out THERE, about 25 to 50 feet in front of our faces, looking for all the world like a bunch of hungry flies circling a pile of manure.

I have been to the Cumberland Soar-for-Fun many times and that was my concept of slope soaring a thousand feet up from the valley and miles of sky out there. Lots of planes in the sky, but plenty of room for them all. Chickies is a whole nother world. Concentration is a word that

describes it. The pilots are all bunched together on the edge of the cliff and the fast little planes dart up and down and around in front of the cliff. The river valley is 300-350 feet (best guess) below, mostly wooded and I was surprised that most of the planes did not end up down there, but, biased as I am, I have to admit that they were flown with considerable skill and by far most of the flights ended with a landing (of sorts) on the grassy area.

Reverting to the first paragraph above, one would think that flying many sailplanes in so small an area would result in many mid-air collisions of the accidental kind. And when the pilots are deliberately trying to ram each other you'd think there would be lots and lots. Amazingly, there were very few. It is obviously quite difficult to hit a fast moving target with a sailplane. There were a few "mental kills." This is a new term to me describing what happens when a pilot crashes due to making a too abrupt avoidance maneuver when he is being pursued. Then the downed pilot scampers down the cliff, retrieves his plane and tosses it back into the air with hardly any lost motion. This is a specialty of the hobby for the young and physically fit not old farts like me.

Launching is simply tossing your plane off the cliff. Pete Schlitzkus asked me to launch his, which I did, in spite of the fact that throwing a perfectly good sailplane off a cliff is contrary to all my instincts. It is hardly a launch; it is more like aiming the plane into the wind and letting go. Up it goes immediately into the crowd of its buddies.

This non-event was very well attended indeed. BASS people on hand were Steve Pasierb, John Appling, Russ Bennett, Pete and Erich Schlitzkus and Al DeRenzis (who was scheduled to arrive after I left). Local flyers there, all LASS members, were Kent Ulrich, Dave Harris and Paul Murr. The Millstone Valley Silent Fliers had a contingent there consisting of Bill Miller, Tony Matyi, Dave Steadfast and Tom Peterson. They drove all the way down from the Trenton, NJ area, about 1 1/2 hours of "heavy foot" driving, according to Bill. There were a few others whose names I did not get.

These foam slope soarers, specifically designed for this madness, are available in low priced, quick-build kits, and go by the names of Foamator, Razor, Foam P-51 and, most popular of all, a flying wing appropriately named Zagi. This name probably comes from zigzag, since this is what all of these planes do and the Zagi, being nothing but a wing, does it best 3.

Of all- These planes are able to abruptly change direction virtually instantaneously. Square loops would be a snap. Watching several of these flying wings doing battle right in front of your nose is a weird scene. It's a quantum departure from the usual graceful sailplane flights we are used to. It's Pretty exciting and even the fascinated spectators, of which I was one, get into it with whoops and Yells when there is contact between the planes or when one goes down.

This hobby has something for everyone, and if this kind of slope soaring sounds like something that would be appealing to you, you can give it a try at minimum expense.