

Why Do Sailplanes Fly Into Trees?

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Before our first 2-function contest on May 5 got under way, I made a test flight and flew my venerable twelve-year old RO-8 into a tree, breaking the wing on this lightly constructed sailplane. It has since been repaired, but it got me to thinking about why sailplanes fly into trees.

Theories abound. Old fashion misjudgment gets most credit.

One rather way-out theory is that the earth's magnetic field is drawn up into certain trees and is stronger in their vicinity than elsewhere. This field affects the electronics in the receiver pack, drawing the sailplane in, and lacking specific counteracting control inputs by the pilot, greatly increases chances of a tree landing. This might account for the fact that on that same day, Fred Blom's sailplane flew into that very same tree. Two sailplanes in the same tree on the same day! Another support for this theory is that at that part of the field, compasses go crazy and want to point downward, indicating that there may be some magnetic rock under the field, which possibly could intensify the earth's field.

Another theory, or rather excuse, that I use all the time is that my depth perception has deteriorated in my old age. This seems to be socially acceptable, and all my flying buddies seem to accept this face-saving ploy. However, if I am totally honest with myself and my thoughts on this subject have to be honest and scientifically plausible if I am to come up with any meaningful conclusions on the matter, I don't find my depth perception degraded in any other area of my life, such as driving, so maybe there is another theory out there somewhere.

After kicking this around for a while, I have come with what I think is a brand new theory. I call it the Theory of Relative Position (Ain't that neat? It even sounds scientific). Let me state up front that this theory does not apply to hand launch pilots who deliberately and often disastrously tempt fate attempting to prolong flights by getting lift over trees (There were some dozen "tree incidents" during our recent hand launch contest at Walkersville).

So what is my new theory? It goes like this: Wherever we are at any given time, we have a mental image, or map, of where we are relative to the objects around us. Whether we are in our living room or driving down the road, we constantly take in positional information which keeps us from bumping into things and keeps us oriented to where we are on the face of the earth. When we fly our models, we stand on a spot on the ground and intently watch our sailplane in the sky. We have a mental image of the field, including the tree line, the roads, the house on the hill and the landing circle. Ordinarily, this mental map works pretty well, and referring to it we bring our sailplane down where we want.

There are times however that I have become so fixated on my sailplane that when I rotated my body to follow the path of my sailplane, my mental map has become skewed. When my sailplane

comes into the vicinity of a tree line my mental map may tell me that that tree line segment is a different tree line segment that is, perhaps, farther away.

After my plane hit the tree in the incident mentioned above, I looked around and was surprised that I was not facing the direction I thought I was. Of course, my mental map immediately snapped back to its proper orientation, but that was a little late. So, if there is any truth to this, my latest theory, the moral of the story is to keep your mental map accurate by glancing down now and then, and particularly when you get in the vicinity of trees. I plan to do this from now on. If I fly into a tree again and I have hit trees at least once a year for as long as I can remember I will have to think up a new theory. if you have a different tree theory, let me know and I will be happy to write it up.