

berkshires week

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Thursday, March 27, 2008 — D6

'I've seen bears, hikers, swarms of butterflies.'



Courtesy photo by Seth Coulter

A Kranich III, a 1952 vintage glider, comes in to land. There are fewer than 30 of these left in the world, and this is the only one in the United States. Mohawk Soaring Club president Seth Coulter bought the glider in Germany with another Soaring Club member, Peter McLean.

Soaring season starts

By Chris Carlson
Berkshire Eagle Staff

Most people have flown in an airplane, but have you flown like an eagle?

The Mohawk Soaring Club wants to give you that chance. Using gliders — vehicles similar to an airplane but without the engine — pilots use rising columns of hot air that are warmed by the sun, and wind that changes direc-

tion as it crosses the tops of mountains, to soar through the air after they are towed aloft by a motorized plane.

The use of those natural elements is what allows birds like eagles and hawks to fly for so long with so little effort. The silence of a non-motorized vehicle allows pilots the peace of mind that humans often associate with birds.

"Being like a bird is a dream for so many people," said Dave Charboneau,

a 52-year-old club member from Peru. "It's just like being a bird. You're free, it's quiet, you're relying on nature. It's quite an amazing sensation, quite an experience."

Founded by a group of General Electric engineers from Schenectady in 1952, the Mohawk Soaring Club, a nonprofit organization that includes approximately 40 members, flies out of Harriman and West Airport in North

Adams on most Saturdays and Sunday from the first week of April to the end of November. The club owns four gliders and a tow plane.

"You'd be surprised by all the things you'll see," said Mark Guay, a club member of 25 years. "You'll be in the same thermal as a hawk or a bald eagle. I've seen bears, hikers, swarms

SOARING, continued on D10

Mohawk soaring club readies for takeoff

SOARING from D6

of butterflies.”

Guay and Brian Doyle both said they love the challenge of gliders. Unlike motorized planes, pilots need to use their intellect to keep the plane aloft for periods of time that can last up to five hours.

“I like those challenges in life,” said Doyle, a 42-year-old from Windsor who went soaring for the first time with his dad while he was a teenager. “There’s no limit to what you can do. There are some people that do cross-country soaring. It takes a lot of confidence.”

Sailors, who are accustomed to using the wind to make decisions, are also often drawn to gliders, Doyle said.

Guay said glider pilots make decisions every 15 seconds, determining what their strategy to maintain altitude will be.

“After a five or six-hour flight, I’m totally devoid of energy,” Guay said. “You’re constantly reassessing the conditions, looking at changes in the clouds, watching out for other planes.”

Members from the club have flown to Sugarbush, Vt. and Cape Cod, while gliders can reach as high as 40,000 feet.



Courtesy photo by Carl Villanueva

Justin Gierka prepares for take-off with the help of Jeff Stringer, a flier and instructor for the soaring club. Gierka attends Daniel Webster College and is pursuing a career in aviation.

Guay has flown all the way to the Canadian border and back to North Adams.

“It’s the purest form of flight,” club president Seth Coulter said. “It’s the closest you’ll get to a bird or a hawk. You’re using the same techniques to stay aloft.”

Coulter said the club is always seeking new members, and that newcomers end up in a glider on their first visit. While the club is largely middle-aged males, the club has female members and is eager to increase its diversity in both age and gender.

“All it takes is desire and a lit-

tle time,” Doyle said. “Some people get stuck thinking it’s a man’s sport or a rich person’s sport. It’s for everyone. More people need to realize it’s available.”

Many pilots will be flying solo within 15 to 20 hours of instruction and ready to apply for their pilot’s license soon after. Information on the club is available at www.mohawksoaring.org

New members pay a \$250 initiation fee, with all members paying \$40 a month in dues. Serving as “pilot in command” requires the purchase of a \$100 share of the club and flight fees are approximately \$25.

Still, it’s far cheaper than paying to fly a traditional plane and far more gas-effective as well, with instructors and the tow-plane pilots all donating their time to the club.

“It’s way cheaper than flying a powered plane,” Charboneau said. “I got my license in the mid-’80s, took a couple people for a ride and never went again. My checkbook was sore.

“Considering the price of things these days,” Coulter said. “It’s pretty remarkable that it’s as cheap as it is.”