Off the Hawkduns

After flying my Sting 3 for most of the Omarama XC Classic (I was dealing with some back issues), the day finally came to fly the T3. SkySight predicted a thermic west-nor-westerly, good for a run along the Hawkduns from Twinburn.

Usually a 35km ridge run, a convergence lures Bill Degen off the Hawkdun Range and over the Maniototo flatlands

My T3 topless glider is heavier and more time-consuming to rig, so Warren Simonsen and Bernie Massey were launched, up and gone before me. By the time I was ready, the wind had increased beyond safe and I had to wait for it to ease (thanks to Clare for the assistance).

It then took me a frustrating 45 minutes to climb out to around 8,000ft before I was finally on my way down the Hawkduns. Initially the wind was NW, but I got no top-ups on the usual spurs. Halfway along the range the wind swung more north and the ridge went into shade, flushing me off while losing height working light and rowdy bubbles. I headed out over the flats toward the track to Falls Dam, chasing a patch of sunshine and possible landing options. Looking back, the Hawkduns were now almost completely shaded.

Over the sunny patch I spent a long 15 minutes working in and out of zeros and bumpy light lift at about 1,500 ft AGL before finally hooking a solid climb. That took me to over 8,000ft and well west of the Hawkduns. The next promising cloud near the Mt Ida spur was contacted at 6,500ft, also well away from the ridge, and again delivered a strong climb. A similar result followed at Naseby, once more topping out above 8,000ft.

The climbs were fairly boisterous, up to 1,000 fpm, so I stayed well below cloudbase and toward the cloud edges so I could dive out when needed. From Naseby I could see seabreeze cloud pushing well inland ahead, and as clouds to the southwest looked more appealing. I stopped chasing the others and headed southwest out over the Maniototo, finding that cruising around 7,000–7,500 ft worked best for cloud selection and avoiding cloud suck.

Left; Looking back at the Hawkduns in shade and seeing the seabreeze lower cloudbase

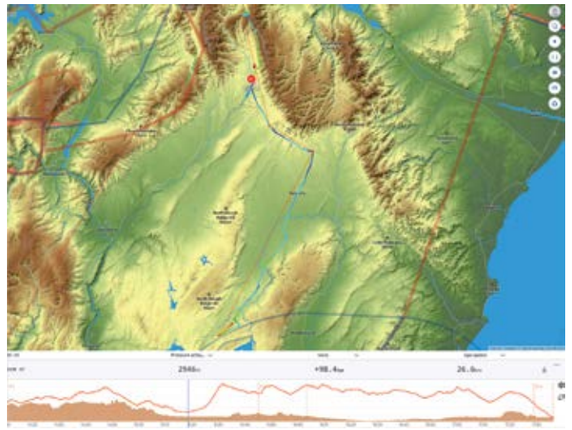
This strategy worked surprisingly well. Passing Ranfurly, I noticed my Oudie N was lighting up a convergence line along my path using the SkySight forecast, which was encouraging, and the wind had backed to NW again.

I radioed Warren to let him know my direction. He was somewhere near Ranfurly, and Bernie was near Macraes; both had hit seabreeze while heading toward the coast.

The air was rowdy at times, with many tight cores and the occasional jolt of weightlessness, but control was fine. I doubt the slower Sting would have felt as comfortable in those conditions, as the faster T3 made it easy to accelerate through the sink areas. I didn't take many photos, preferring to keep hands on the bar, and the abundance of lift and presence of major roads below were reassuring.

Still on the Skysight convergence going southwest between Rough Ridge and the Rock and Pillar Range, I topped up to near 8,000ft again. At that point Middlemarch looked easily achievable, even allowing for hitting seabreeze, but I chose to stay over sunlit ground on a more southwest line. Passing Paerua, Outram appeared within reach, or at least Clarks Junction if the seabreeze cut things short. However, increasing shade ahead began to reduce the options.

The Oudie reminded me of airspace at 7,500ft, which then limited my height for a long glide. A lake ahead showed no vehicles, boats, or other activity, suggesting locked access roads, which was later confirmed. It was also looking mostly shaded ahead so I climbed to 6,900ft and skirted along the airspace boundary, not seeing any promising clouds and expecting a longish glide before hitting a seabreeze for a quick descent, and with a major pickup drive, so I turned back along the Taieri–Paerau Road to assess landing fields.



Left; The SeeYou tracklog showing my track over the flats and the lowest point with the wind coming from the NNE!

Above; Looking at North Rough Ridge while heading South

Wind at my height was 10-15 knots NW, with similar on the ground below confirmed by wind on the river and ponds. I picked a large flat paddock and on final approach at about 50ft I felt the NW disappear and realised I was coming in downwind! I stepped back into prone, and landed smoothly on the wheels, stopping about 5m from a fence. Those wheels earned their keep that day; but on a rougher surface the outcome could have been different. After carrying back toward the road, the wind direction changed several times, typical of a convergence zone.

As is often the case on the Maniototo, there was no phone reception. I attempted to use Apple's satellite texting to confirm my position, later discovering that with cell provider 2degrees, it currently only works for emergencies.

The only passing farmer kindly gave me a lift to Lammermoor, home of a gin and whisky distillery, where I was able to call and confirm my position to Clare. Next time I'll land there because it has bigger paddocks and I perhaps their shop will be open. It will be good to have a drink during the typically long wait for pickup.

It turned out that the longest flight at 117km came close to being a short awkward one and with a landing that could have gone wrong. It did however show the value of SkySight Weather on the Oudie N. On previous flights I had kept on the Hawkduns ridge, then lunged out SE over the flats until grounded by seabreeze. It sure was enjoyable flying over flat ground not worrying about terrain but unfortunate that it's hemmed in by airspace.

More Info, more tech

Since this flight, Naviter added more features to the Oudie N. While previously able to see weather stations by using its web browser, that only showed one station at a time and required the flight screen to drop to the background.

It now has all weather stations on the flight screen, showing wind direction arrows and speed, with the option to view 15-minute wind progress for the past 90 minutes. It also shows webcams and of course any pilots with Oudies that are sharing flight info and also sailplanes which I think are on the Open Glider Network.

It's a tidier and more intuitive way to see what's happening on the ground, and pilot info is significantly easier for team flying than relying on radio comms.

Satellite txting is possible with most late model cell phones on the One NZ network. If you want to stay with your existing cell provider, use an eSIM for that and NZ One on a secondary SIM that you activate when out of cell cover. Needs a Prepay plan $10 plus sat txt option $5/month.

Below; Looking north along a now better formed convergence a while after landing