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Finally — Over 200 Miles in the Eastern U.S.

In the spring of 2000, only a few months after my first flight beyond two hundred miles in Australia, Mark Poustinchian (usually just called Mark P.) and Mark 'Gibbo' Gibson started making long distance attempts from Quest Air Soaring Center, twenty air miles north of Wallaby Ranch. In fact, with some financial encouragement from their glider manufacturer, five pilots at Quest had taken up the challenge of flying far in Florida.

I had known Gibbo since my first flying days back in Washington State, and had flown with him in the 1989 Manufacturer's League Meet at Pine Mountain. He had often been a member of the national team, and had placed third in the Worlds when they were held in the Owens Valley in 1993. A big, heavy guy, he was known for his wild style and willingness to take the kinds of chances that other pilots shunned. For years he had lived in the Owens Valley, and he willingly flew in some of the biggest air conditions found in the western U.S. And it is in the west that the biggest and baddest conditions in the world can be found.

Mark P., a native of Iran who had previously been a nuclear plant operator in Arkansas, had just moved to Quest with his wife in their recreational vehicle with the express desire to set records. He had been a local hero back home at Mt. Nebo but didn't have any competition experience. His desire was to focus on the lone long distance flights.

The guys up at Quest were all flying Ghostbusters — rigid wing gliders like mine, but from a competing German manufacturer to my ATOS. They had the advantage of being a group, sometimes flying as a team and encouraging each other to get going early when it was weak and difficult to stay up. And they were twenty miles closer to the Georgia border, the big goal line for every Florida hang glider pilot.

During a normal year they would have had to contend with a lot of little lakes and marshes at the beginning of a flight north from Quest. Often I'd found a lot of sink over Quest. But in this drought year, the dried-up wetlands had proven to be great thermal producers, giving good early conditions for the start to the Quest pilots.

Down the road at Wallaby, with Mikey busy teaching and Michael gone, I was feeling a little isolated. Just as much as the guys up north, I wanted to get to Georgia and set the east coast record. I knew that I had the experience, the skills, and the hang glider that could get me there. I was better at understanding and predicting the weather. I would just have to do it on my own.

On March 9th Gibbo followed a street of clouds starting southwest of Gainesville, and found himself in a convergence line that headed straight for the Georgia "finger," a jog in the state line formed by St. Mary's River where it loops fifteen miles to the south. The clouds were drying up behind Gibbo, but were forming in front of him just as fast. He realized that he was actually managing to stay in front of the trailing edge of the convergence. He just had to keep going fast enough to stay in the are where the convergence was still happening and not get left behind.

A convergence line is an area where winds from two different directions meet and are forced together upward. In regions with moist air, areas of convergence are usually marked by a line or lines of cumulus clouds. For example in Florida, with on-shore flows from both the east and west coasts, a convergence zone will often form along a generally north/south line, right up the middle of the state.

Mark P. had gotten an earlier start than Gibbo, but had taken a slightly different line to the west. His route didn't take him toward the Georgia finger but up Interstate 75 to the north-northwest, and in this direction the Georgia border was another twenty miles further north. At the end of the day, he hadn't quite made it to the border, and had to land at 135 miles out. Gibbo had flown just five miles further, but he had crossed the border into the finger. That small difference had made Mark Gibson the first hang glider pilot to fly into Georgia from central Florida, and had earned him the $1,000 prize.

The very next day Mark P., never to be outdone, tried again. This time he made it to Georgia — the long way, up Interstate 75. And a month later on April 11th he flew 192 miles, not only surpassing Michael Champlin's state record but setting a new East Coast hang gliding record at the same time. (Because Mark P. flew a rigid wing hang glider Michael's flex wing record stood for a few years more.).

By April there was a lot more action at Wallaby Ranch, in preparation for the Wallaby Open. Mike Barber had given up his instruction duties to train for the meet, and Kari Castle had arrived from California. On the day of Mark P.'s record flight, Kari set both the Florida state record for women and the women's East Coast record at 115 miles.

I had been in the air early myself on that day, out in front of all the other pilots, feeling pretty good about my prospects. But after only 35 miles I was forced to land when the new prototype glider I was flying started to fall apart in the air. The Velcro that attached the sail to the carbon fiber leading edge had come undone on my left wing, and the sail had begun to roll up. In spite of a wicked turn, I was still able to fly and land the glider without having to throw my chute. But as I stood on the ground looking at the sky, I knew the others were taking advantage of the best day of the season so far.

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The Florida competitions had come and gone, and I was back to flying on my own, or with Mike. On May 8th I had my longest flight in Florida so far, 179 miles up Interstate 75 — and landed just short of the Georgia border. The winds and the convergence had kept drawing me to the northwest, even though the Georgia border would have been a lot closer if I had just gone straight north from Wallaby.

Five days later I woke up sick and lacking in sleep. But the forecast was irresistible: convergence up the middle of the state right toward the finger, with light southerly winds. I felt terrible, but decided to give it a try.

It was already after noon when I launched, and when I did get into the air I was not convinced that the day was any good at all. There weren't any cumulus clouds at first, even that late, but soon they started forming near me. This lifted my spirits and I decided to head north. The lift had turned out to be quite good and I began to enjoy the flight.

Ninety miles into the flight, just southeast of Orange Lake and only a few miles northeast of Gainesville, I saw a big "blue hole" downwind of me — a cloudless area on the east side of the lake. I had flown up by Orange Lake quite a few times, but had always stayed five or ten miles east of Orange and Lochloosa Lakes, usually because I was fighting a west wind. But to take my usual course now would put me in big sink, and almost certainly on the ground.

There was a lot of swamp around both Orange and Lochloosa, and I was concerned about possible landing areas if I got low over on the west side. But from my vantage point I could see a few farms and pasture areas on the skinny isthmus of land that separated the two lakes, with cumulus clouds above them. I decided I was willing to give it a try.

I had to dive fast through a long passage of sink over Orange Lake, but finally made it to the little isthmus. My reward for this risk was a good thermal right over Cross Creek, the shallow creek that runs between the lakes. This was once the home of Marjorie Kinnan Rawlings, who wrote *The Yearling* and *Cross Creek*. But I was just happy to find good lift over that long skinny thread of land.

I had always found abundant bird life whenever I flew near these lakes. This time I was joined in the thermal by a swallow-tailed kite, one of the most beautiful raptors — and later by a young bald eagle, its head just turning white. They knew it must be a good thermal when they saw something as clumsy as a hang glider climbing fast.

North of Cross Creek the farms disappeared, and for the next ten miles I was flying over forest plantations. But I was plenty high, so I didn't worry any more about what was on the ground. I was able to continue to fly in spite of being quite sick. I had done all the planning in advance, I was flying the plan, and the plan was working — so I didn't need all that much mental capacity in the air.

The forest plantations blended into farm lands as I approached the St. Mary's River, then they took over again. Now it was getting late in the day and I was not sure just where to go. The Okefenoke Swamp was just off to my northwest. I followed Highway 23 north, looking for a logged off area that was reasonably clear. I was flying barefooted as usual, counting on Florida's nice grassy pastures, but it looked as though I would be landing in a rougher area today.

I finally found a reasonably large clear-cut without too much slash, and put it down at 155 miles, seven miles past the Georgia border. I was still so sick I had to lie down in the back of my truck and rest for a while. Still I smiled to myself, knowing I would be claiming the $1,000 prize from Wallaby Ranch for the first flight from there into Georgia.

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Moderate east winds and high pressure dominated the week before May 20th in central Florida. The surface wind forecasts were for a bit of south wind and a convergence zone to the north and west of Wallaby Ranch — but my actual experience in the air near Wallaby showed that it was consistently more east than southeast. I had taken a couple of short flights during the week, but had decided early each time that it wouldn't be possible to go far, after experiencing weak lift and low inversions.

On Saturday the windcast looked similar to those of the past week — but perhaps this time there really would be a bit of south in the winds. Carlos Bessa, our chief Dragonfly pilot, reported southwest winds during the early morning tandem flights, with the ground beginning to bubble up with light thermals. There were no clouds. The Florida zone forecast called for light southeast winds.

With no cumulus clouds showing that morning, I had nothing to motivate me. My ATOS had been set up all week in the hanger, so I was ready to go. But I wasn't rushing out to launch early (these days for me here at Wallaby that meant about 9:30 AM). If there did turn out to be generally favorable winds, I figured they could make up for a later start. After all, I wasn't thinking of going three hundred miles.

A leisurely breakfast at ten, and still there didn't seem to be any urgency. It wasn't until almost eleven that we saw a few clouds to the southeast. Maybe something was getting through the inversion after all.

If the clouds had started forming at nine or 9:30, it would have made sense to get going then. With any cumulus clouds forming it would have been at least possible to stay up, even though the cloudbase would have been low, probably under two thousand feet at first. Still, when you've only got so much altitude to work with, staying up is more difficult. Get too low and you can't get back up.

Of course, the lift is also pretty weak in these early morning conditions and thermals are farther apart, so you've got to find the lift and just stay in it circling and circling till you get as high as possible. You might even just stay in zero lift and wait under the clouds until the day improves, rather than venture out hoping to find the next spot of lift. But without clouds to show where this light lift was, there was no point in even launching early that day.

The soarcast from the balloon sounding at Tampa Bay showed very strong lift. It predicted nonexistent winds on the surface, and up high an east to southeasterly flow. Cloudbase at 7,800 feet was a wonderful promise, but it would sure depend on getting a thermal strong enough to push up through the inversion layer.

I decided to launch as soon as I could after I finally saw clouds forming off to the southeast, and was able to get into the air at 11:19 AM. Carlos was in the super tug and put me in a thermal right at the south edge of the Ranch. Unlike all my previous flights during the week, I was immediately in strong lift. This changed my attitude about the day a bit.

As I circled around under the blue, I saw that the clouds we had noticed were just a very small grouping way off to the southeast. There were no clouds near the Ranch, and none beginning to form. But I could see a short north-south line of clouds far to my west, probably forty miles away. It looked like a weak convergence line.

The convergence was probably forming because of an onshore flow on the west coast. The generally east-southeast winds were meeting this westerly onshore flow and forming the convergence.

Given the good lift over Wallaby, I decided to head northwest toward Quest Air, just to see if things were indeed as good as they seemed. Without clouds, there weren't any thermal markers in the sky, so I'd just have to pick spots off the ground or blunder into something.

I wasn't able to get up over 3,500 feet – the height of the obvious inversion. No wonder there weren't any clouds nearby. I could see the top of the inversion layer because the haze formed a line at that altitude. The lift I experienced inside this inversion layer, which was about a thousand feet thick, was obnoxious. It just kept knocking me around, even while I was on glide. Mike Barber, who launched after me, commented later on how unpleasant the air had felt.

Still, there were plenty of thermals, and though they were not so strong as to be scary I didn't have too many worries about getting to the next one. I found that I could get up from around a thousand feet without difficulties. In fact, I liked being lower, since there was less turbulence below 2,500 feet. I even found myself leaving lift low, just to get out of the bad air.

This strategy almost backfired when I got down to five hundred feet, four miles south of Quest. I had been moving along pretty quickly, ignoring turbulent lift, and then I had to scrape myself off the deck. Of course the lift down that low was even more turbulent, so I wasn't a happy camper.

As I approached Quest at about 12:30 I spoke with Mikey on the radio. He had just launched, and I asked him what he wanted to do. I had been thinking about circling around Quest and heading back to the Ranch. I didn't like the air and wasn't getting high; I felt that I wouldn't be able to go far. Mike responded that he thought the day was slow, but that we might as well keep going. That was just enough encouragement for me.

As I passed directly over Quest, I noticed two Ghostbusters, both ready to go. One was on the cart and waiting for the tug to pull him or her up. It looked like I had an hour's head start and twenty miles on these pilots. I wondered where the third or fourth Ghostbusters were. Had they taken off earlier? Were they out ahead of me? Would I be able to go the furthest today? A couple of those Ghostbusters belonged to Mark P. and Gibbo. I wondered if they were in the air or not. Perhaps they were already out in front of me and doing better.

There was good lift to the north of Quest, so I was able to get back up to the top of the inversion and continue north over the former swamps that had become hot dry pastures in the drought. I was still not able to get high, but I didn't worry. This year there always seemed to be plenty of lift in this area.

Approaching Wildwood, the first town north of where I crossed the Florida Turnpike, I made sure to get high (well, as high as I was going to get). Wildwood with its big lakes, small pastures, and lots of trees always seemed to be a sinkhole. I needed to clear the trees and make it to the dry fields to the northwest of town, over by Interstate 75.

Given that I couldn't get particularly high, I kept along Interstate 75 and away from the wooded areas just to the west. At the Dunnellon off-ramp, I started working a bit of two hundred-feet-per-minute lift from thirteen hundred feet. Then at 3,800 feet it turned on — and suddenly I broke through the inversion, going up at six hundred. I climbed out to over five thousand feet. The day had changed.

While I had worked my way to the west as I flew north, the convergence line that I had spotted soon after launching was still at least twenty miles further west. Now I had finally gotten good lift and high climbs, but I was thinking about my big error from two weeks before, the day I had flown 179 miles.

On that flight I hadn't gotten under the convergence line late in the day. If I could have only gotten to the convergence zone earlier, I would have had a much longer flight. Now I knew that I had to get into the convergence area if I wanted to stay up late in the day. But it didn't look possible.

I headed to the north from the Ocala airport, getting down to eleven hundred feet over a field where I had been low before. I had passed a lot of strong lift on the way, since the air was still just too turbulent for me — I thought I would rather get low enough to find a solid core. Of course, now once again I got too low, and the lift down low was also completely turbulent. I felt I couldn't win, and I was not enjoying the flight at all.

I moved up Highway 27 to the northwest, toward Williston. I was going to be pushing further west than I had gone before, trying to get to the convergence line marked by the cumulus clouds. Ten miles northwest of Newberry, and 120 miles into the flight, I was back down to fourteen hundred feet over a small set of dry fields surrounded by forest. I picked out a dark field and started working some broken lift (it was all broken that day), and searching around I got into stronger and stronger lift. I climbed out to 5,500 feet, the highest I had been so far in the flight.

Now the convergence line was just a few miles to my west. The clouds over there on the line had been quite sparse, but they had been consistently there. I had watched this line since the start of the flight, and while the clouds were widely spaced, they were on a line that pointed north.

Finally, at 125 miles into the flight, I was able to get under a cloud for the first time. I was at Hatchbend, just south and west of the meandering Suwannee River. The lift wasn't that good, but I felt that I had now at last gotten a chance to stay up and go far. Of course, the air was still knocking me around; I wondered when I was going to start having fun.

I kept heading northwest, trying to get as far into the cloud street as possible. Then I heard from Mikey, who was way to my south, that he had hit the sea breeze while driving too far to the west. It was blowing fifteen miles per hour out of the southwest, and had put him on the ground just south of Williston. Now I had been warned: it was possible to go too far west.

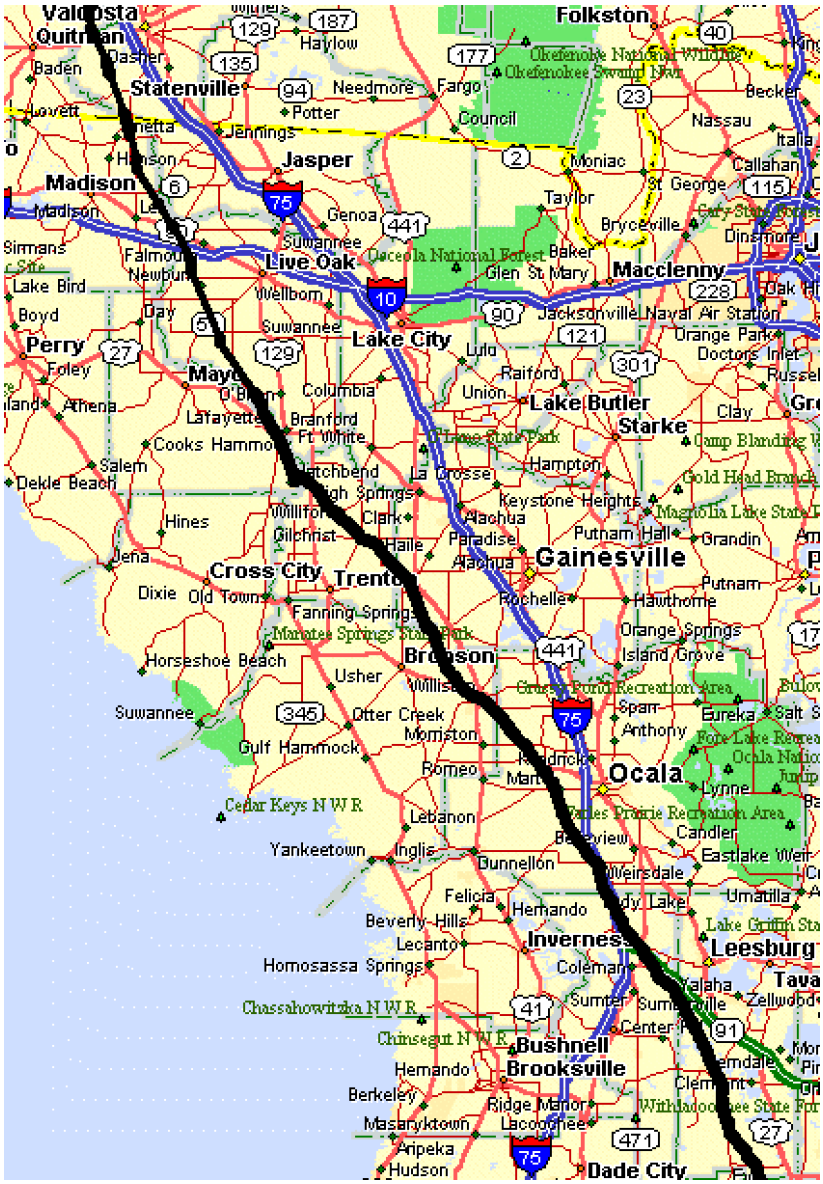
I had been watching the lakes as I flew over them, and I didn't see any wind on the ground. My vario showed a slight wind out of the south. I reasoned that if I were too far west I would definitely have seen strong west winds on the lakes below, so I continued on my courseline.

I followed along with the clouds above me and the winding Suwannee River, and then the Withlacoochee, below. At first I had been tracking northwest, but now I was heading more northerly. With consistent, visibly marked lift, I stayed high and moved quickly. It was getting later in the day, but the lift was better — though no less turbulent.

At about 5:30 the lift finally began to mellow out a bit and I began to enjoy the flight. In northern Florida I found for the first time wheat fields that had been harvested, so there were lots of golden brown fields that should be good thermal producers. They sure had plenty of clouds above them. At six hours and fifty minutes into the flight I climbed at six hundred feet per minute to 7,600 feet, the highest of the day and nearly the predicted cloudbase.

Now I started to count down the tens of miles as I moved quickly from cloud to cloud, gliding for about ten miles between each climb. First I crossed the border into Georgia, then at 6:49 I crossed the two hundred mile barrier at 3,400 feet. The clouds had dissipated and I was just running in buoyant air. I was able to glide for twelve more miles before I started running out of daylight.

I came in low over a farmhouse next to a beautifully maintained mile-long field. There were a few folks standing out in the driveway as I came over them at a hundred feet. To be polite I asked for permission to land, though of course it was too late to get a no for an answer. I came in for a no-step landing in nil winds. The folks at the farmhouse invited me in for cake — I had dropped in on their mom's birthday party.



Given my failure to get into the convergence on my last flight in this direction, I had made every effort to get there this time. I was finally able to do it, but it had sure taken a long time. The cloud line had kept receding to the west (or at least it had seemed that way). The forecast had predicted that the convergence zone would be much further east than where I found it. But there sure was good lift there when I finally got up and under those clouds.

On this day I had broken the east coast hang gliding record by twenty miles, flying 212 miles from Wallaby Ranch to northwest of Valdosta, Georgia in about seven and half hours. This was the first two hundred mile flight on the east coast of the U.S. However, it was not a week later that Larry Bunner, who had been trying for ten years, made a 213 mile flight out of a flight park west of Chicago and broke my unofficial east coast record.

It’s great, isn’t it, how record attempts encourage others?

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