

THE FESHIE BLUE WAVE

by Phil Hawkins (written in 2009 before Phil and Fiona moved to the highlands)



To a visitor from the flatlands south of Birmingham, the wave at Feshiebridge can seem to be an elusive animal. Fiona and I make the 960-mile round trip to the highlands at least twice a year now, but the only thing that can be guaranteed about the weather in Scotland is that it's always fickle. On more than one occasion I have only taken the glider fuselage out of the trailer whilst packing up at the end of the week. "Peat" usually flies the glider home, purchased in sacks from the garage in Aviemore, lying cosily in the cockpit as we trundle back down the M6.



As all glider pilots know, persistence pays off in the end. I've had some memorable flights from Feshie in "Sarah" my beautiful Mini-Nimbus, but in recent years we have taken to flying our K-21 around the mountains as well. It has the coveted trigraph ETA, and we gave it the diminutive name "DaisyETA" partly as a mark of respect to her older sister the Slingsby T-21 at the Oxford GC. In the horror film *Killdozer* the name Daisyetta was coined by Latin American construction workers for a bulldozer, model D7 (*de siete* in Spanish) which was a demonic lumbering thing with a mind of its own. By contrast, our DaisyETA is a refined lady, if a little steady and ponderous. She may be famous one day, if I ever get around to writing the TV drama I have in mind.



In May 2009 we had rented for the second time a charming little croft cottage called Easter Inveruglas, situated in the hamlet of Inveruglas just south of Insh village. It's about six miles from the airfield. It has an inspiring view across meadows and the Spey marshes towards the Monadhliath peaks beyond, which were still snow capped at that time of year.



The lambs in the meadow, which I think belong to George Gow the butcher in Kingussie, were full of fun every time we passed by. Sometimes they were chasing after the grey lag geese who also crop their grass, but usually they just charged around in gangs letting off steam. The meadows are also attractive to curlew and oystercatchers, which come up the river valleys in the spring to breed. Often we awoke in the early morning to their bubbling and peeping calls, and the occasional cuckoo (increasingly rare in Oxfordshire) could also be heard.

There was a vast range of diverse weather in the Mayfest weeks this year, everything from rain, hail, snow and gales the first week, compared with cumulus, high cloudbases and wave in the second week. The day of the legendary blue wave began calm and clear. It was one of those mornings where the pure cobalt dome of the sky settles snugly over the mountains, and it seems like nothing will ever change it.

The forecast had been for increased wind from the southeast, and various people at the Club had been pessimistic about flying on this day at all. But the light south-easterly remained light, or at least manageable, all day. Takeoffs and landings from both ends of the runway were made seemingly at random, depending on what the variable surface wind was doing at the time.

It had been some years since I had last experienced the blue wave, perhaps in 2000, the same year when I also flew a 300km task over the highlands. I knew the conditions were potentially right for a repeat performance, but of course that didn't mean the wave would co-operate. DaisyETA had been positioned at the south end of the strip as recommended, and we were towed off towards Loch an Eilein over the treetops in rough rotor turbulence. The tug was circling in the rough air to gain enough height to cross the Einich edge, the anticipated entry point to the wave. Concentrating hard, I hung on grimly until the tug pilot waved us off with the cheerful advice: "Don't drift any further back than this."



Within moments of pulling the bung at about 3,500ft we were perched at rest in silky smooth air over the middle of Glen Einich. A magical view, to see the loch surrounded by its rim of awesome cliffs, and we were hardly any higher than those upper ramparts. Despite the canopy reflections this photo was definitely one of Fiona's best.

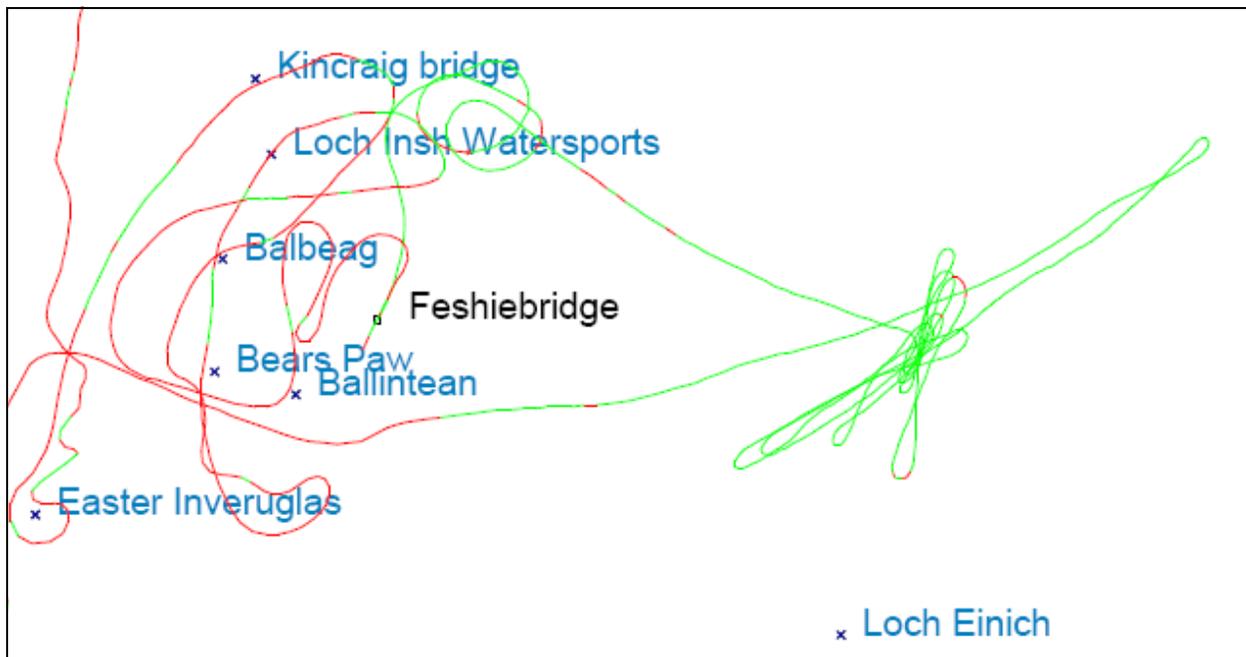
Only a small beat worked at first, but as we climbed higher the lift area became more extensive. Eventually I was able to re-align a much longer beat pointing towards the Cairngorm railway car park. Lift strength was about 3 knots most of the time, although there were stronger bursts whenever we passed through the peak of the wave.

We just sat there in the blazing sun with the altimeter going round and round, marvelling at the views of the Cairngorms opening up around us, still with bits of snow clinging to their northern slopes. From above 10,000ft Scotland looks relatively flat, just a bit wrinkly. The distant visibility was not as good as two days previously when we flew in thermals (at one point sharing a thermal with two golden eagles) but we could still see as far as the Moray Firth and the area north of Inverness known as the Black Isle.

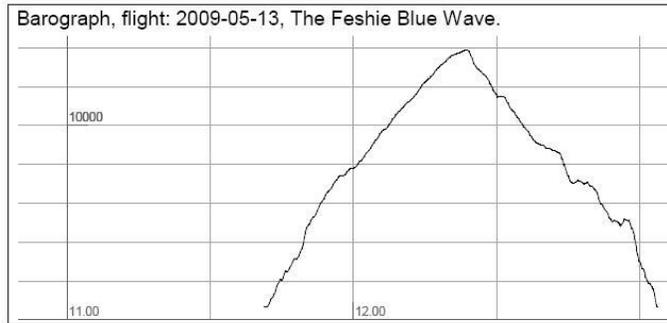


DaisyETA was suspended, motionless, as if by invisible wires. She felt secure, homely and safe. It was a wonderful feeling to be in the Feshie blue wave at last, ascending gently under the dimensionless vault of the sky. The flight had a pronounced unreal quality, as if we were sitting in a simulator rather than really flying in the endless void above the mountains. We saw only one other glider during our climb, much higher than us in the clear blue. This was probably glider C6, flown by one of our friends from the Welland club.

Our logger trace clearly shows the takeoff run towards the north, circling over the forest to gain height, then heading south-east to the Einich edge. On this diagram, as tradition demands, green means up and red means down, the zigzag beats in the wave being piled on top of each other. Without oxygen I had decided to break off the climb at 14,000ft above sea level, which is 13,150ft above the airfield. The descent over the Spey valley was straightforward, interrupted at times by secondary waves and occasional rotor turbulence. Whilst exploring the mountains north of the Spey I soon noticed how strong the upper wind was. Nick Norman said later the wind at 10,000ft



was 35 knots. It seemed stronger than that whilst heading back into it, but of course the ground drifts by much more slowly anyway as seen from higher altitudes. As we sank below 4,000ft the air was still fairly rough, but plenty of speed in the circuit was the order of the day. We landed in the opposite direction to takeoff. The barograph trace is fairly uninteresting as traces go, but it does tell its own story.



We relaxed outside the clubhouse for much of the afternoon. In the heat of the day even the sheep were sunbathing! At one point we were listening to the disabled pilot of WA2, one of the “Walking on Air” group who was nearing FL195, the height where he needed to be talking to the control service at Inverness. We later learned that he had reached 23,000ft for his Diamond height. That’s quite an achievement for a wheelchair pilot. Both owners of C6 obtained gold heights, one after the other. The invisible blue wave stayed in the same place over Glen Einich for the entire day,

and even the last launch of the day in *Papa Kilo* the club two-seater went to above 10,000ft just like everyone else.

After dinner at the club (Maggie’s delicious venison pie) we were watching remarkable clouds over the hill, evaporating and re-forming in filmy layers, with a rosy glow imparted by the setting sun. They looked like muslin curtains draped over invisible domes, constantly changing their shapes. The residual laminar flow from the blue wave was obviously being pushed upward by turbulent disturbances below.

Returning to Easter Inveruglas at dusk, the sky was once again crystal clear, ultramarine at the zenith and fading out to the colour of peaches around its edges where it fitted neatly into the jagged skyline of the Monadhliath. We love Glen Feshie.

