AIRPROX Insight

DIRECTOR UKAB'S MONTHLY UPDATE June 2025

AIRPROX OF THE MONTH

Watch out for the wire

Cables worked well in bringing down aircraft during the wars, so why would you fly near them?

Photo for illustrative purposes: Shutterstock: Deef Smits

Way back in February 2023 I wrote an Insight newsletter highlighting, among other things, the risks involved in flying over a glider site that conducts winch-launching (most do) below the maximum winch-launch height.

That newsletter was followed by a CAA podcast on the subject and advice to pilots on the CAA's website regarding flight in the vicinity of gliding sites (https://www.caa.co.uk/glidingsites).

Since then we have seen fewer reports of such direct overflights, but they do still happen. Take this event, **Airprox 2025011**, which I can honestly say is one of the most alarming I have come across in 12 years of working for the UK Airprox Board.

It involved an SZD-51 Junior glider and a PA-28 over the Long Mynd gliding site. The glider was winch-launching and had a nose-up attitude of about 45°, restricting the pilot's ability to lookout in all directions. What's more, the launch phase is a particularly busy time for any pilot, so they were also concentrating on that.

The PA-28 pilot was approaching the area from the north-west at an altitude of about 3000ft and was receiving a Basic Service from Shawbury Zone, however, the glider was not equipped with a transponder and actually didn't show at all on radar until about 5-10 seconds before the closest point of approach between the two, so there was no opportunity for the Shawbury controller to warn the PA-28 pilot about the glider.

The Piper pilot had an electronic conspicuity device that could have detected the FLARM-equipped glider, but it seems that there was no alert from that device to warn of the glider's proximity; the FLARM on the glider would not have detected anything emitting from the PA-28, so there was no warning to the glider pilot of its presence either.

Worryingly, the last line of defence – see and avoid – didn't work either because neither pilot sighted the other aircraft at the time. This Airprox was reported by the glider pilot after they had been told what had been seen by the launch crew on the ground. The closest the aircraft actually were to each other was recorded as about 400ft vertically, with the PA-28 below the glider, and 0.15 miles horizontally.

The reason I find this Airprox so alarming is not just because the aircraft got particularly close, but because there were two cables attached to the glider at the time the PA-28 passed below it — one for the launch and one to retrieve the cable back to the launch point when it was on the ground.

It's a salutary lesson that flight in the vicinity of glider sites needs to be carefully thought through during pre-flight planning. Of course, gliding sites are, usually, in Class G airspace and do not have any 'protection' around them (such as an ATZ), so there is definitely no requirement to avoid them. However, flying close to a glider site increases the likelihood of encountering gliders, and transiting below the maximum winch-launch altitude adds a further hazard – the cable (or, in this case, cables).

On the CAA 1:500,000 and 1:250,000 VFR charts glider sites are depicted by a 'G' symbol surrounded by a circle of 1nm radius. The circle does not signify any airspace associated with the site – it is simply there to draw attention to the presence of it. If the symbol is accompanied by a number in the bottom right-hand corner, this signifies that winch-launching takes place and the maximum altitude of the winch-launch – simply put, the potential height of the cable at the top of the launch, *plus* the airfield elevation.

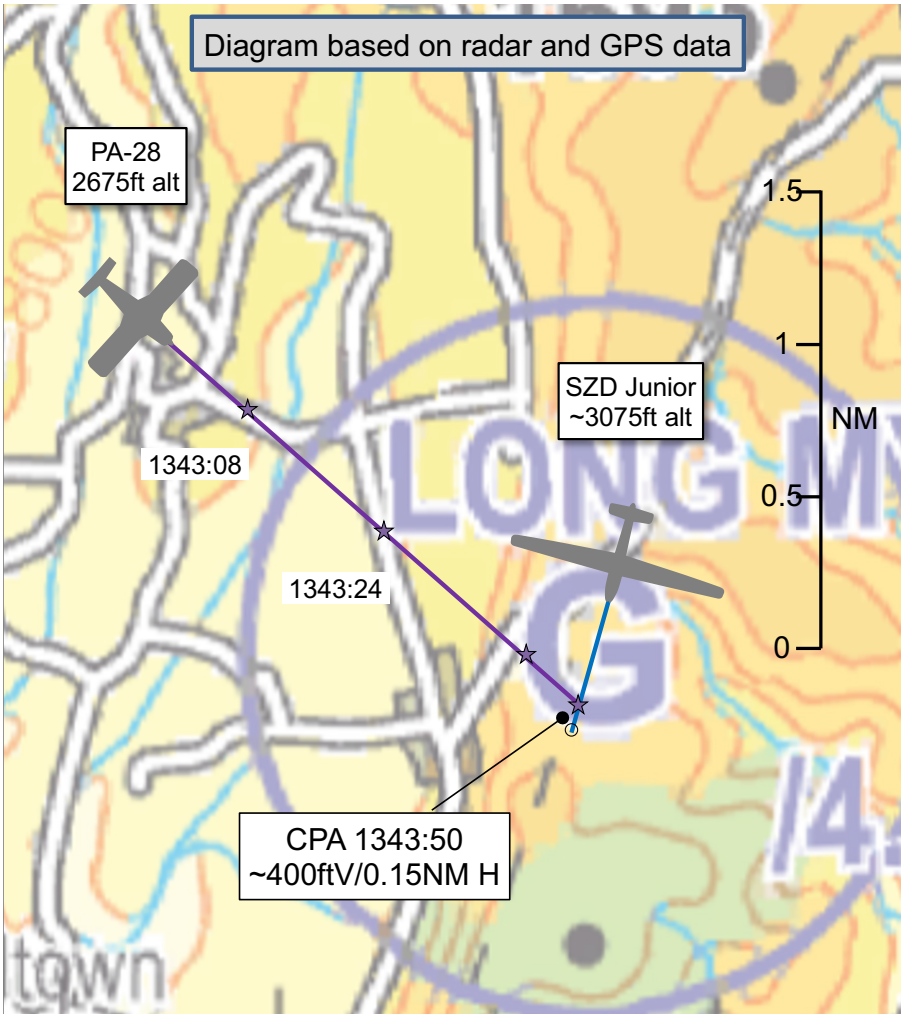
This information is also available on most aircraft navigation applications (e.g. SkyDemon, ForeFlight etc) but often the information needs to be selected to be displayed. This is why pre-flight planning is so important, because if the site isn't displayed to us in-flight then how are we supposed to remember that it's there? It follows, then, that if we're using apps for our route planning, we also need to be cautious about what is, and is not, displayed to us.

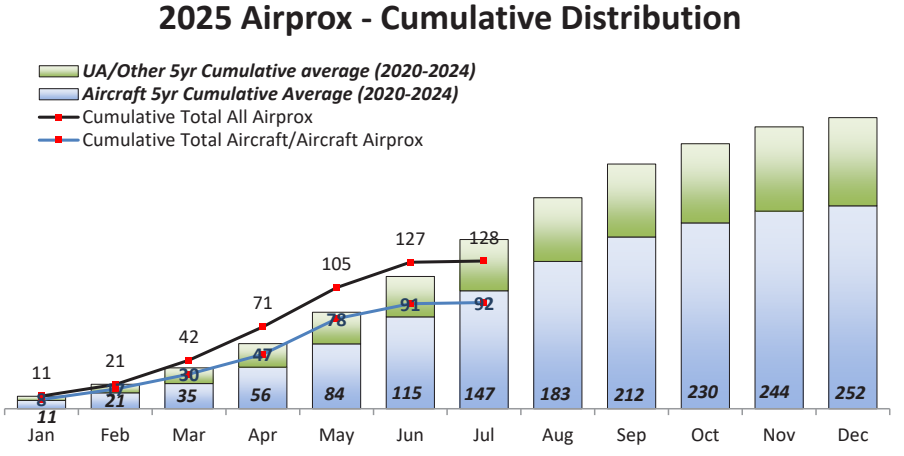
So, if planning to fly near, or over, such a site we should be considering what altitude we want to fly at. If we can't (or don't want to) fly above the maximum altitude of the winch launch, then we should consider either giving the site a wider berth (about two miles should normally be enough, but the greater the distance from the site, the greater the likelihood that we won't encounter traffic departing, arriving or in the circuit). At the very least it's worth giving the site a call on the radio to let them know that we are there.

A word of caution here, though; glider pilots are not required to hold a Flight Radiotelephony Operator's Licence (FRTOL) and it is very rare that there is an Air/Ground Radio Operator at a glider site, so don't necessarily expect an answer to any calls you make – *but it does not* mean that the site isn't active!

Another point worth mentioning is that, in this case, the PA-28 pilot had a couple of issues with their on-board equipment. Nothing dramatic, but it did mean that their attention was divided between trying to resolve the issues and lookout. There is obviously little choice if we are flying on our own but, if you do have company in the aircraft, consider dividing the tasks so that at least one person is looking out at all times.

Finally, I'd like to offer something for all those involved in gliding activity to think about. I'm reliably informed that it takes roughly 1-1.5 minutes for the full process of a winch-launch. During this time, a GA aircraft flying at a 'normal' airspeed will cover around two miles. A trial conducted by GASCo and Jarvis-Bagshaw found that it is unlikely that a GA aircraft will be seen beyond a range of about two miles. This means that, at the point of visually clearing the airspace for a glider launch, it is unlikely than any aircraft that might present a threat to the launch will be within visual range. Food for thought…





BOARD SUMMARY

This month the Board evaluated 28 Airprox, including seven UA/Other events, six of which were reported by the piloted aircraft and one by the drone operator. Of the 22 full evaluations, ten were classified as risk-bearing – two as category A and eight as category B.

During the meeting, the Board assessed the first of the 2025 aircraft-to-aircraft Airprox reports, covering all reports submitted in January and February this year. This is fairly common because there are far fewer Airprox reports submitted in the early months; reporting increases significantly from the end of March every year. No Safety Recommendations were made.

The graphic above shows that it has been a steady start to the year – broadly in line with our expectations. At the time of writing, reporting in June is lower than the same period in each of the last four years (post-COVID), and I wonder whether this is because the message is 'getting out there' with respect to reducing the likelihood of having an Airprox?

There are many factors that influence Airprox reporting, so it is impossible to say with any certainty what might be having the greatest effect on reporting rates, but I can be optimistic if the data shows that fewer Airprox are being reported, no matter what the reason for that reduction.