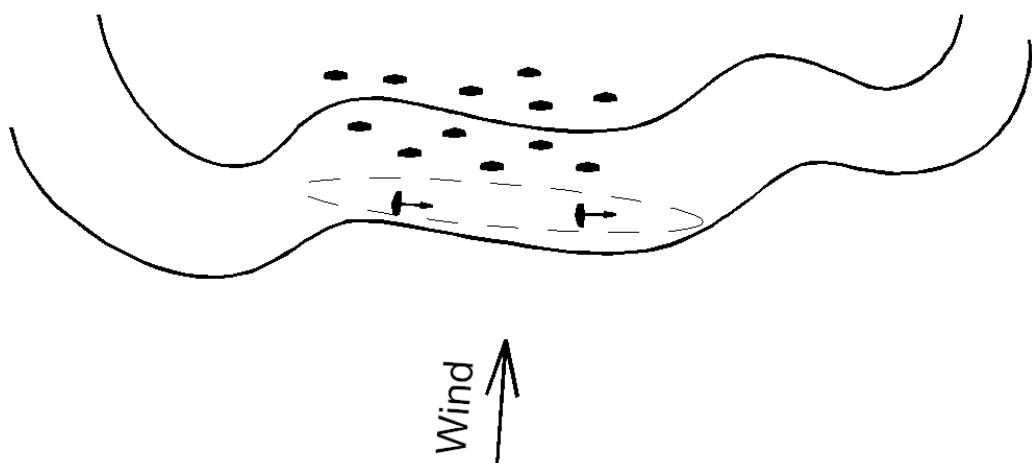


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Crowding - Nigel Page

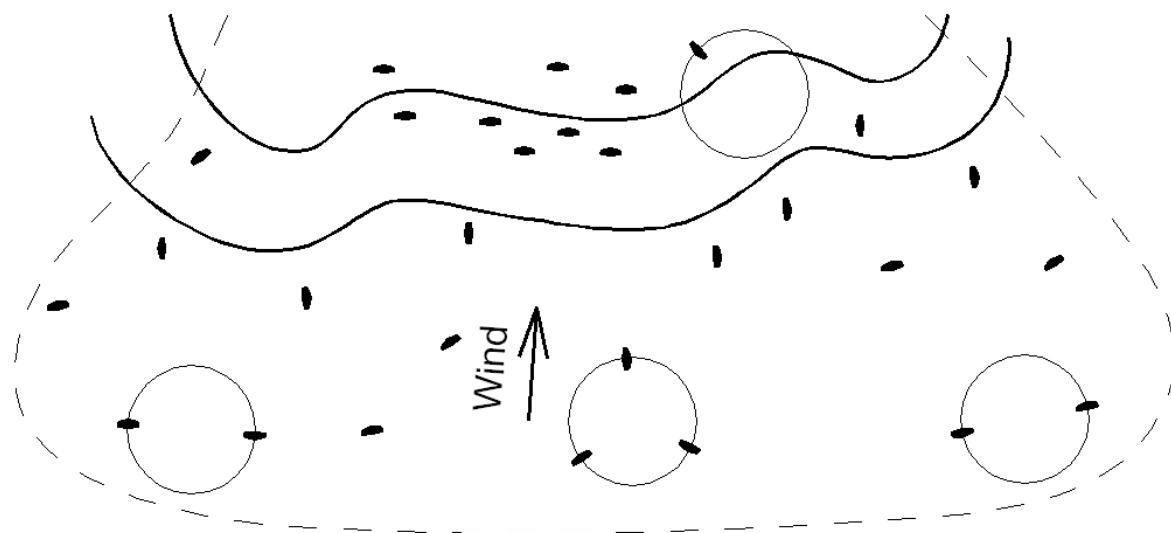
In a recent discussion someone asked "How do we know when a ridge is getting crowded?" The simple answer is "When you, yourself, think it is getting crowded." Different pilots have different ideas of what crowding is. Crowding may happen gradually over a large area or suddenly become a problem in a limited area. Let's have a look look at a typical crowding situation.

We have a light wind on a hill with a promise of thermals. A lot of gliders are rigged and waiting to take off. One or two people are scratching about in a limited patch of lift close to the hill in the area shown by the dotted line.

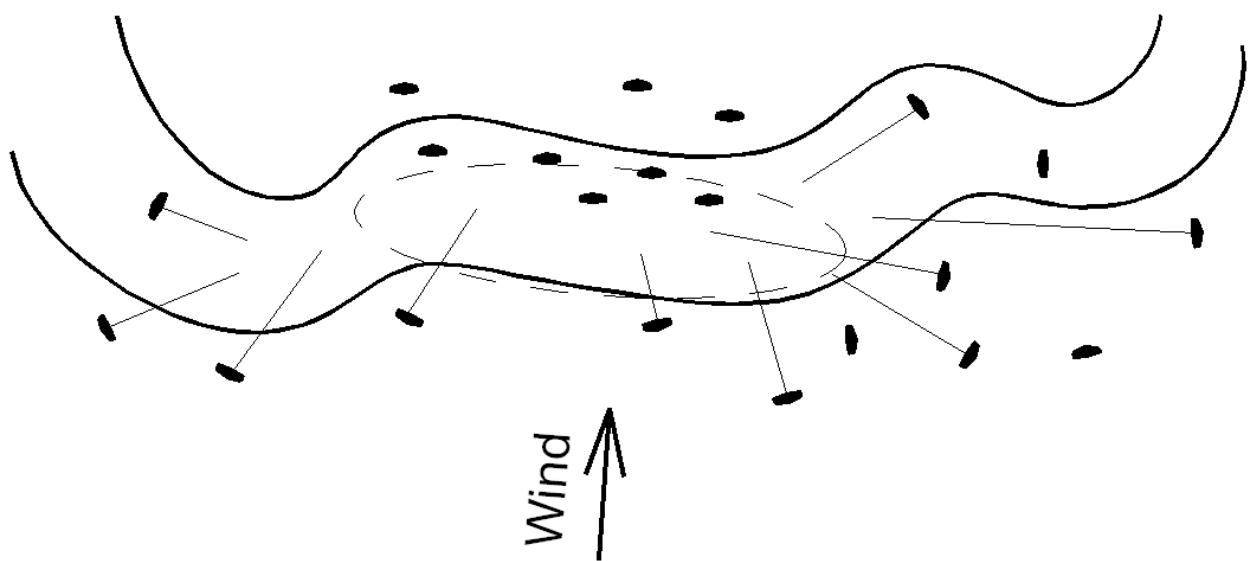


Most pilots are simply waiting for better lift and the few pilots who are flying might land from time to time and take turns to fly in the limited area of lift.

The lift begins to pick up and soon lots of people are airborne. Staying up is not too difficult over a large area just by flying back and forth. Some pilots have found thermal cores and are circling.



However, the good lift does not continue. It is “cycling” and after ten minutes or so it starts dropping off. Pilots do not want to bottom land so they head for the area they know was working before the cycle began with a view to top landing if necessary.



Suddenly it's crowded in front of the launch area. To make matters worse some of the pilots who messed up their launches when the lift was increasing have not twigged that the lift is dropping off and are still trying to launch (yes I have done this!). It's a real mess.

Can we avoid this? The first thing is to be aware that in light thermal conditions lift is likely to come and go. When the lift drops off all the airborne pilots have to go somewhere and most will want to top land or scratch about near the launch area. If we seem to be flying towards a busy area we must turn away and be prepared to bottom land if necessary. It can be surprising how quickly crowding can occur. If we are heading for a very small area of lift we may suddenly find out that there is definitely a crowd.

If we are having difficulty launching we must keep a check on the general situation even while we are struggling with our misbehaving glider. We must make sure we do not inflate as someone is coming by. If it is busy we must not launch.

Another key element is lookout. On roads we become very good at keeping an eye on the relatively limited areas we need to observe for our safety. When flying we need look all around and up and down very frequently. We must also keep refreshing our mental image of the wider scene as well as gliders nearby. Intentionally looking around also helps to avoid “target fixation” when we forget to look around because our focus is on a hazard in one direction. Yes, I sometimes find myself doing this too.

If it is too crowded it is too crowded. If we are on the ground we must not launch. We might consider balling up our glider up to make more space for those wishing to land. If we are in the air we must keep away from crowded areas even if it means bottom landing. Air to air collisions are often lethal. We all have to be a bit more careful and alert.

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