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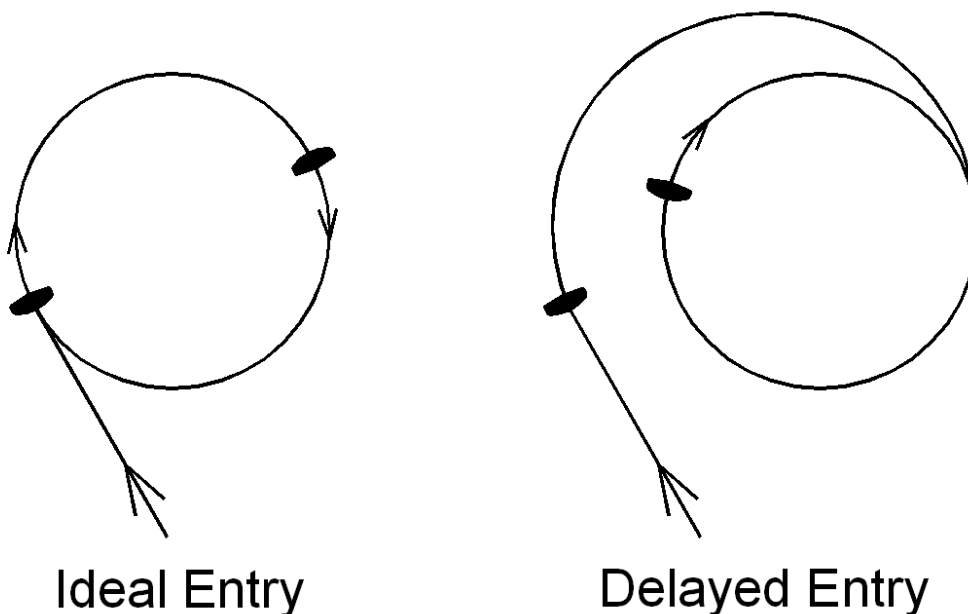
Thermalling With Others - Joining Thermals - Nigel Page

Nobody owns a thermal. As well as considerations of safety, when joining one located by another pilot we have at least a moral responsibility not to jeopardise his use of it. Considerate use of a thermal by one pilot located by another should enhance it's value to both.

Joining Thermals

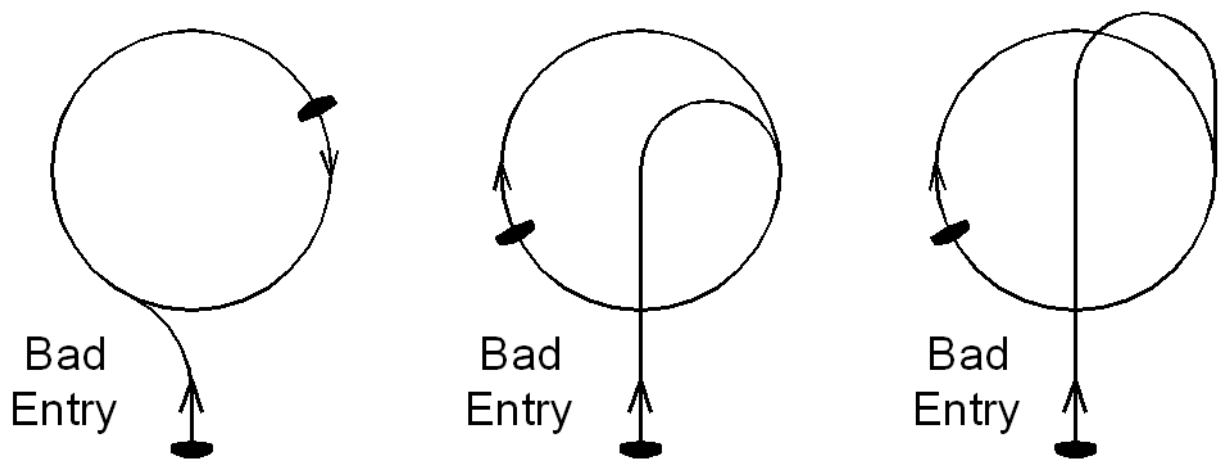
Clearly the first thing is to thermal in the same direction as the other pilot. This helps even if thermalling a nearby core because the cores will often converge. This may not seem important if there is a large vertical separation, but it will become a problem if the lower pilot catches the other up or if a third pilot wants to join. Being able to thermal in both directions is an essential skill we must learn.

Secondly we have to decide which part of the circle to join. If the vertical separation between the joining and thermalling pilots is poor it is vital that the joining pilot takes great care. We should aim to arrive at a tangent to the circle at a point opposite the thermalling pilot. To achieve this it may be necessary to delay entering the thermal by bearing away from it and allowing the thermalling pilot to get ahead. This may seem wasteful but there is more to be gained from delay followed by co-operation than by conflict followed by distrust.



Try to avoid sharp turns which are inefficient, disorienting and which will probably unnerve the thermalling pilot.

Do not aim for the centre of the thermal or you will have to either weave about or cross in front of the other pilot and turn tightly to get onto his track.



If we cannot join with another pilot cleanly it is better to let him climb above us, join below, and sort it out from there.

Maintaining Contact

Often other pilots in a thermal are better than a variometer for staying with a core. If you watch a large group of seagulls thermalling you will see they sometimes stay close together and sometimes spread to look for better lift. Most thermals waver about as they climb and continual re-centring is needed. When flying opposite another pilot this is usually accomplished by noting if he climbs relative to us at one part of the circle. We then move the centre of our circle towards that area by straightening our turn for a short period at the appropriate part of the circle. The other pilot should have seen that he was outclimbing you at that time and adjust his circle accordingly.

Thermalling With Hang-Gliders

Similar principles apply to thermalling with hang-gliders but they are faster than paragliders and may have to fly a larger radius turn in order to keep on the opposite side of a core to a paraglider. In a small fast core they may turn very tightly like a dog chasing its tail. If we encounter a hang-glider thermalling this way we will have to join either well above or below it.

In a steeply banked turn hang-glider pilots flying prone cannot readily see the space that they are turning into. Experienced hang glider pilots may briefly bank away from a thermal to peep under the wing.

None of us are perfect and the fickle nature of thermals is such that conflicts will occasionally occur. Despite this it is great fun to thermal with a considerate pilot and the benefits of group flying make co-operation well worthwhile.