

# Off-Airport Landings

By Bryce Herkert

I had the opportunity to study at the University of Aberdeen in Scotland for a year as a Rotary Academic Ambassadorial Scholar. One day I found a flyer for the university gliding club, which was attached to the Deeside Gliding Club. As I progressed through badges and ratings, it became necessary to prepare for, and eventually make, off-airport landings. The approach for field selection was more methodical than I had experienced as a glider pilot in the U.S.

I greatly appreciate Thomas Knauff's discussion of off-field landings in the February 2017 issue of *Soaring*, where he uses the word **SLOW** to remember Slope, Length, Obstructions, and Wind. Another, more detailed, approach is to think of off-airport or off-field landings in terms of words starting with the letter S:

**SHAPE:** It doesn't have to resemble a runway. For example, a circular shape would allow the pilot to land directly into the wind. Not every suitable runway is in the shape of a rectangle.

**SIZE:** The bigger the better. Be careful not to pass up a good field for a better one you can't glide to. I tend to notice fields appear much smaller the closer I come to landing in one.

**SLOPE:** An uphill slope is the best and a downward slope is the worst. I would accept a downwind (within reason) upslope over a downslope with headwind. Landing downhill can be difficult. Slope can be difficult to detect until you get closer to landing, and then it is probably too late to find a new field.

**SURFACE:** Pick a harder surface over a softer one and look at the crops (height and type). Crops tend to be taller the closer you get. It's important to know the type of crops for the

region you are flying. While flying in MT a few years back, an instructor told me to "go for gold" when picking a field because gold fields are typically harder surfaces as a result of recently harvested wheat, versus softer, green fields with growing crops.

**SURFACE WINDS:** Determining wind speed and direction can be a challenge, but here are a few indicators: whitecaps or lack of water movement on the upside side of a body of water, trees and crops swaying, smoke and dust. Preflight weather reviews of expected surface winds also help.

**STOCK (livestock):** Some animals just don't care for people or airplanes. Some animals are attracted to aircraft and seem to think they are edible.



**SURROUNDINGS:** Fences, power wires, tall trees. Our organization had a terrible accident where a helicopter crashed into some power wires. The sun made them difficult to see.

Stay committed, unless there is an obvious and major problem with the initial field selected.

While there are a number of additional considerations and requirements for landing off-field, hopefully these items will at least provide you with an easy to remember way of evaluating a field in a pinch.

*About the Author: Bryce Herkert is a CFI-G, A, MEI, II. He has served as a sailplane check pilot for the Civil Air Patrol in TX and was, until recently, the Aviation Training Officer for the Aviation Division of the Drug Enforcement Administration. ✈*

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