

# Soaring SITES V

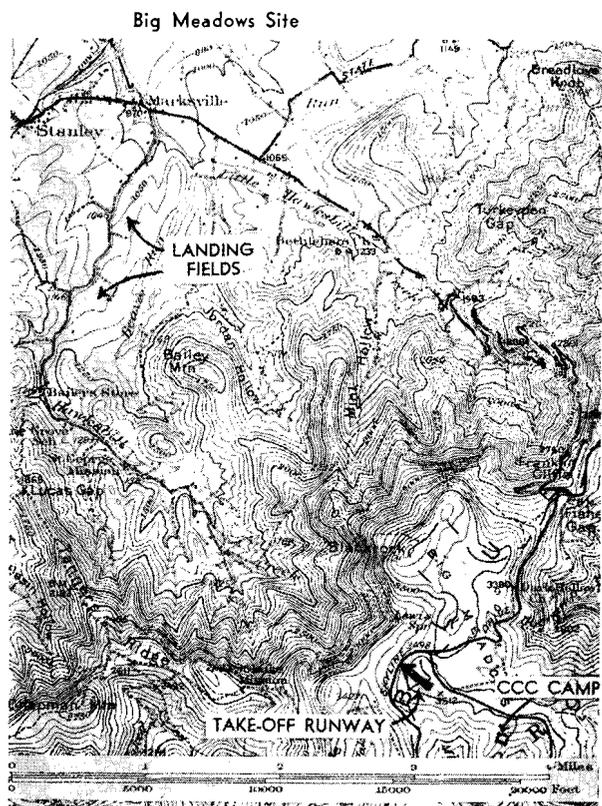
## BIG MEADOWS, VIRGINIA

by Donald Hamilton

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The possibilities of Big Meadows as a soaring site occurred to me the moment I arrived there on a hike in April, 1933. A month later, I persuaded Lieutenant Commander Ralph Barnaby, then President of the S.S.A., to accompany me to the site, and he readily agreed that this might well become one of the great soaring sites of America.

Located on the now famous Skyline Drive in the Shenandoah National Park, the comparatively level, cleared plateau that is Big Meadows has an exact geographical location of Long. 78° 27' W and Lat. 38° 31' N. This places it 8 miles southwest of Skyland, 10 miles airline south of the town of Luray, and approximately 100 miles over excellent highways west from Washington, D. C. The take-off area is at an altitude of 3,500 ft., which is 2,200 ft. above the comparatively level and open valley floor. Take-offs into west winds are made down a sloping knoll across the Skyline Drive and out over a U-shaped cut-back in the great Blue Ridge Mountain range, which is covered with dense forest. It is also possible to use auto tow along the highway to a height of 500 ft. above the hill before releasing. The first steps to establish a soaring site here were to obtain the active support and cooperation of Arno B.



Contestants at 1934 Meet Capt. Joseph Koch, U.S.A.

Cammerer, Director of the National Park Service, and James R. Lassiter, of the Shenandoah Park. With their permission to test the site, Ralph Barnaby made the first take-off by shock cord launching in a Franklin PS-2, in May, 1933. He had no difficulty in staying aloft and, after he landed, four members of the club went up for their "C" licenses. The club then used the new site on week-ends throughout that summer.

The first flight of over an hour I made on September 9th, when the slope wind carried me over 1,000 ft. above the ridge. Early in October, Richard duPont, accompanied by several other pilots, arrived to look over the site. They stayed several days and made a number of flights.

On September 20th, Emerson Mehlhose took off at Rockfish Gap, many miles south of Big Meadows, past which he soared on a three and a half hour flight in the Haller Hawk, which he landed near Front Royal after covering 71 miles. The most outstanding flight of the expedition was duPont's flight the next day. He covered 122.5 miles before landing near Frederick, Maryland, nearly doubling the existing American distance record. He reported that he gained his best altitude, more than 3,000 ft., over Big Meadows.

After the Soaring Society decided to sponsor a meet from September 15th to 30th, 1934, the first real development began. During the summer, CCC youths, under the command of Lt. (now Captain) Joseph Koch, cleared a runway by removing stumps and gnarled trees.

As proof of the adequacy of the new runway, four aeroplanes landed there during the meet. These included an Aeronca, Fairchild 24, Stinson Reliant and a Navy Hell Diver from Anacostia. The ships at the meet included three Franklins, the Alfaro two-seater and two Bowlus-duPont high performance sailplanes; Warren Eaton's "Falcon" (now in the Smithsonian Museum) and Richard duPont's "Albatross II".

In the two last mentioned ships, Warren Eaton, beloved founder of the S.S.A., and Lewin Barringer, on the

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Air-view—Looking WSW

