Flying XC Between Hollister and Avenal

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Overview of the Area. You need to be familiar with the airstrips, landmarks and common lift sources described below-- look them up in the turnpoint database, plot them on your sectional chart, and view them in Google Earth. If you load the turnpoint file into SeeYou, you can see these points plotted on a sectional chart within SeeYou. If you have a handheld GPS, load as waypoints the airstrips and landmarks described below.

Essential Airstrips.

On the way out:

Panoche (aero-retrieve OK)
Hernandez South (aero-retrieve OK)
New Coalinga (aero-retrieve OK)
Avenal (aero-retrieve OK)

On the way back, same as above in reverse order, plus Bikle (slopes up to southeast; aero-retrieve OK)

Less critical airstrips, but you still need to know about (no aero retrieve):
Bumb Ranch (if you get trapped west of Panoche Pass)
Mercey Hot Springs (8nm north of Panoche)
New Idria (hard to spot, but probably better than open pasture if you can find it)
Indian Valley (one-way uphill landing to east)
Pine Canyon (looks like a dirt road in a pasture)

Airstrips on the way back into Hollister:
Lonnie's (dirt strip about halfway between Bikle and Hollister, aero-retrieve may be OK)
Christensen (aero-retrievable but owner has noise issues with neighbors -- avoid using if at all possible)

Areas with potentially landable farm fields:
Priest Valley
Lonoak
San Benito (east of Pinnacles)

Optional knowledge: If you are flying on the Gavilan Mountains, usable airstrips include:
King City (Mesa Del Rey)
Metz
Salinas (controllers are friendly; a glider landing gives them something new to handle)
Avoid Clark airstrip -- narrow with vineyards along sides.
Soledad duster strip is small with trees close to sides, but looks usable.
Fat City airstrip long out of use, has vehicles parked on it.

Pinnacles airstrip no longer exists.
Fox Creek Ranch is new airstrip on east side of Gavilan Mountains. No aero retrieve at this point.
The old Paicines airstrip next to Panoche Road has high vegetation on it.

Landmarks and Lift Sources.

EL1 ("Elevator #1")
Chemise (peak with fire lookout)
EL2
EL3
EL4
San Benito Mountain
Microwave Towers
Center Peak
Priest VOR
Lookout
Black Mountain

Places to Avoid. Parachute drop zone near Tres Pinos!

Initial Tow. Typical tow to about 6200 MSL, releasing 15 nm SE of Hollister and 15 nm NW of Panoche airstrip. Glide direct to EL1 ridge.

Typical Route and Tactics. Most common route is: EL1 (or maybe Chemise), EL2, EL4, Center Peak, Lookout, Black Mountain. Then return via Lookout, Center Peak, EL4, EL2, final glide to Hollister.

Scratch for first lift around EL1 -- be willing to take a weak and disorganized thermal at first until you have a margin of altitude to work with. Climb to 6000 or more at EL1, then head direct to EL2. After climbing to 6000 or more at EL2, continue on to Hernandez area and EL4. If you can get to 8000 MSL or more at EL4 or nearby, then continue to Center Peak.

If there are clouds, ignore this route advice and follow the clouds!

The "Elevators" are locations where good lift is often found. On any given day, the lift may be right on the marked point, or few miles away (or not there at all). For example, EL1 is on a ridge line that runs east-west for about 4 miles. I usually start at the west end and work eastwards along the ridge, looking for the best lift. Of course, if you see other gliders climbing or have radio reports of a good thermal, use that information to narrow your search.

Besides the "Elevators", good lift is usually over the highest ground, such as the Center Peak ridge and the ridge between Lookout and Black Mountain.

Thermal lift along this route is strongly influenced by convergence.

Convergence line may be east or west of the route described above; adjust accordingly. When flying a convergence line, you often hit bubbly thermals too small to turn in, then solid lift at high points such as the Elevators. Outside the convergence are large zones of sink. Best tactic is to cruise along in the convergence line without circling, until you hit a thermal that is large and strong enough. What is "large enough"? My rule of thumb is good lift must continue while I count to three, before I will start to circle.

Convergence may be marked by differences in visibility / haziness of two air masses on either side of convergence line, also by haze domes at top of inversion layer, or by cloud whisps. If there are actual cumulus clouds, there may be a pronounced "step" in the cloudbase at the conversion line.

Listen on 123.3 Mhz for reports from pilots ahead of you on course. If you have not studied the landmarks listed above and marked them on your chart, these position reports won't do you much good.

Fly "airport to airport" in the sense of always having an airstrip in glide plus an altitude margin (I use a 2000 ft margin when on course). But don't fly to the airstrips and expect to find lift there! The lift is usually over the highest ground, and the airports are out in the valleys.

On the way back: Get as high as you can near EL4 before proceeding towards EL2 -- 9000 or 10,000 MSL at EL4 will often get you final glide to Hollister. If you can gain more altitude on the way back after EL4, take it unless you are very high. EL2 is often the last lift, and 7000 MSL at EL2 will usually get you back to Hollister. Expect no lift north of Chemise on the way back. Do not go to Panoche Valley or EL1 on the way back, unless you need a climb and lift is marked by clouds or there are recent reports of lift there.

On the final glide back from Chemise, you will usually find dead air and light winds -- sometimes a tailwind at first. The sea breeze may be blowing 15 knots down Rwy 24 at Hollister, but the marine layer there is usually less than 2000 ft deep. You may start to notice a headwind below 4000 MSL on the glide back, but not strong until you glide below 2000 MSL.

Landing back at Hollister.

When arriving back at Hollister, sea breeze will usually be blowing down Rwy 24. If I have enough altitude, I fly to a point northeast of the airport, then make a midfield crosswind entry for Rwy 24. This gives me opportunity to observe windsocks and the situation on the ground. When rolling out on Rwy 24, turn off runway to the right on the stub taxiway to clear the runway and leave room for other landing or departing traffic. Then get your tail dolly and wing wheel and move glider across 24 back to main ramp when the opportunity is clear. Ground crew will usually be available to assist.

CALFIRE water bombers and the parachute jump plane are accustomed to dealing with gliders at Hollister. Talk to them on the radio if you need them to give way for your landing. They may be able to land or take off on Rwy 31 while you land on Rwy 24. You should not need to roll through the intersection of 24 with 31.

Weather Information. Check Dr. Jack's NAM and RASP BLIPMAPs.
NAM: http://www.drjack.info/BLIP/NAM/CANV/index.html [Use the BLIPMAP Univiewer.] Most important NAM BLIPMAPs are BLTop and Cu Cloudbase where Cu Potential > 0.
RASP BLIPMAPs for Hollister to Avenal area: https://rasp.nfshost.com/
Most important RASP BLIPMAP is BL Max Up/Down (Convergence).

Subscribe to HGCgroup on Yahoo -- more experienced pilots will predict the weather for you.

Airstrip and Landmark Information.
Turnpoint database: http://soaringweb.org/TP/Hollister
Files and photos on HGC group on Yahoo.

Operations at Panoche. If you need to land at Panoche:
Make traffic announcements on 123.3 Mhz.
Runway is oriented 08 / 26. Left traffic patterns both runways.
Power lines at west end of Rwy 26. Always land on Rwy 26 unless very strong winds from east.
Wind socks at both ends of runway.

Plan your landing so you can roll to the end of the runway, to leave room for other gliders to land behind you. This usually means touching down about 1/2 way down the runway. Runway 26 has gentle upslope to the west, plus you will not roll as far on dirt surface as you would on pavement.
If you don't roll to the end, check visually and on radio for other landing traffic. Pull your glider to the end as soon as practical, or if necessary pull it off the runway to the side to make room for other gliders landing. DON'T LEAVE YOUR GLIDER IN THE MIDDLE OF THE RUNWAY AND WALK AWAY.

Don't roll off runway to the side until fully stopped. There may be actual foxholes along runway margins. Near the west end of the runway there are vehicles parked at the runway edge on the south side. Stick to the runway center.

If you can't reach other gliders on radio to arrange an aero retrieve, walk south across the road to the Panoche Inn and they will call Hollister Soaring Center office by phone landline (cell phone coverage unlikely at Panoche). Buy a soda and a T-shirt while you are there.

Aerotow launch will be on Rwy 8 unless strong winds from west. When aero-towing out of Panoche, close all cockpit vents before takeoff. Towplane will probably disappear into a cloud of dust -- just follow the rope and don't kite up on tow. On the tow back, release when you have Hollister in glide.

The keys to a long cross-country flight (per Ramy Yanetz):
Start early.
Keep going.