

A Science Service Feature

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? WHY THE WEATHER ?

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RIDING THE THUNDERSTORM

The turbulence and terrific uprush of air at the front of a thunderstorm are notoriously dangerous to aviators--much more so than the lightning attending such storms--and the leading American textbook on meteorology merely expresses the consensus of authoritative opinion in the statement that "all thunderstorms must be avoided by aircraft of every type."

But the world moves swiftly. The statement just quoted was written before the recent development of "thunderstorm soaring" in Germany, where the men who pilot motorless aircraft now habitually take advantage of thunderstorm updrafts to gain altitude. A German writer on soaring as practiced in the Rhön Mountains, says: "Formerly when there was a sign of thunder over the Wasserkuppe the airmen brought their machines down as quickly as possible. Those times are now passed. After 1926, when Max Kegel, quite accidentally, managed to fly during a thunderstorm, Nehring, Kronfeld and Groenhoff often flew in storms deliberately, to establish records and since then to glide during a thunderstorm has become quite fashionable. Directly a storm is imminent everyone rushes to his plane and awaits the right moment to start. Pilots in their light gliders slip in front of the thunderclouds and are carried farther and farther, to distances of 100, 200 and nearly 300 kilometers. The craft soars to 1,000 or 2,000 meters at a terrifying speed. With terrific violence the slight glider is thrown up and down and the pilot is hurled about in his little 'wooden box' until he nearly falls out of his seat."

Robert Kronfeld, a leading exponent of this novel sport, has attained a height of 8,000 feet in a thunderstorm.

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