

little slope thermals to the top of the ridges and moved on west. The bird didn't work each one to its ultimate height which, for me, was not conducive to comfort in the unlandable country below so, when I hit a 900 fpm thermal, I stayed with it and climbed to 12,000 feet, while twisting my head around to keep the condor in sight. I lost him.

After hours of soaring that day and 123 miles of motor gliding, looking for condors, I headed back to Flabob at full speed to get home before sunset. On the way back I did some joyous rolls and loops and turned off the engine coming up on the last loop for a leisurely glide to the airport. I had used only 6 gallons of fuel during the eight-hour flight.

But, you might ask, what does one do with a single-place airplane? But, let's face it—sport flying is, and can only be, a personal experience. I would intensely dislike riding with a passenger. The greatest joy of flying is its almost absolute freedom.

Coming back from the Watsonville, California, Antique Airshow that same year, I was cutting across the mountains, twisting and turning at my whim, just looking over valleys and following roads to see where they went. I couldn't resist soaring with hawks and eagles here and there, as I spied them circling in thermals. South of Coalinga the bare, buff desert invited me to skim along the ground watching the rush of sand, stones, and rocks slide under me. I saw a group of weathered gray buildings ahead, pulled up and circled, letting the speed drop off to 60 mph. It was an abandoned ranch. Down went the gear and a careful landing was made on the pebbly desert.

I walked through the piles of sagebrush and explored the dusty barn, half full of dried out haybales, the tool shed with varied and odd tools and farm parts on the workbench, and the sand drifted floor. The house still had furniture, some clothes, old newspapers and magazines from 12 years past. I spent a quiet half hour sitting on the front porch, watching the sun sink lower and thinking about the ranch and the people that must have worked so hard trying to make it go in the dry climate. I felt uniquely privileged to be able to stop here at such an isolated place of calm beauty.

The Fournier is not the best plane for this kind of activity. The little engine doesn't give enough drive to go storming out of short, rough fields. But once I ease it into the air, gently and carefully, it will keep on accelerating slowly to a speed comparable to planes of four times the horsepower. This stop made me too late to get back to Flabob for a daylight landing so I landed at a mountain airport, prepared to spend the night in a sleeping bag. An old pilot living there drove up and took me home for a steak dinner and an evening of aviation talk, and insisted on giving me a couple gallons of his tractor gas before I left in the morning. I soared with two more condors on the way, before getting home.

To me it was a wonderful and delightful adventure that weekend, but it would not have been with a passenger. Who would put up with such whimsy? Many of my flight decisions would have been predicated on my passenger's fears, wishes and schedules. A passenger sometimes makes flight less free. Happily, the RF-4 is such a unique machine that there is little problem trading airplanes with owners of