



# The AMA History Project Presents: History of the TORREY PINES GULLS RADIO CONTROL SOARING SOCIETY



AMA Club Charter #129  
Started in the late 1960s

Written by GF; Reformatted and edited by JS (03-04/2023)

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*The following was written by Dr. Gary Fogel and was submitted for use by the AMA History Project in January 2023.*

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## The Torrey Pines Gulls Radio Control Soaring Society (AMA #129)

The Torrey Pines Gulls Radio Control Soaring Society (TPG; [www.torreypinesgulls.org](http://www.torreypinesgulls.org)) is one of the first clubs that chartered with the Academy of Model Aeronautics (AMA; chartered club #129) dedicated solely to RC soaring. Formed by a collection of enthusiasts in the late 1960s and chartered in 1970, the club started its activities at the famous Torrey Pines Gliderport in San Diego, California. By that time, Torrey Pines was already established as a world-class site for slope soaring by manned sailplane enthusiasts ever since Charles Lindbergh's coastal soaring flight on February 24, 1930 along the ridge in a sailplane designed by Hawley Bowlus. At Torrey, slope lift is generated on a regular basis by the westerly winds as they come off the ocean and meet the 300-foot-high cliffs. Ideal days for flying RC sailplanes at the location are generally when the wind is nine MPH or more from the west. Of course, lighter/more efficient aircraft can be flown in lighter conditions. The landing zone at the Gliderport is east of the cliff behind the flight mound and is very generous in size, making landings quite easy on most days.

These attributes made Torrey a natural training facility for amateur radio (ham) operators interested in equipping free flight gliders with RC in the 1950s. In fact, a local dentist and ham operator, Dr. Bob Chase, established an FAI F3B World Record for RC slope soaring endurance of over eight hours in 1956, doing so with a single-channel escapement system controlling just the rudder. In the late 1960s, the number of RC enthusiasts flying at the site increased, and the formation of the TPG was led largely by Kelly Pike and his father Jim, Randy Warner, Larry Fogel, Jim Deck, and others. They recognized the importance of unifying and establishing a connection not only with the AMA, but also with the Associated Glider Clubs of Southern

California (AGCSC) that operated manned sailplanes at the cliff so that safety could be maintained for both disciplines. This led to a very close working relationship between the TPG and AGCSC.

Later in the 1970s, as the popularity of hang gliding grew nationally and internationally, hang glider pilots also started flying from the cliffs at Torrey Pines. This group of enthusiasts eventually formed the Ultralight Flyers Organization (UFO) which later became the San Diego Hang Gliding and Paragliding Association (SDHGPA). The three organizations (AGCSC, TPG, and SDHGPA) worked with the City of San Diego to establish a Torrey Pines Soaring Council (TPSC) to generate rules that would enhance safety and cooperation for the betterment of this unique motorless flight park. In the late 1980s, paragliders were added to this environment. In the 1990s the Gliderport was designated as a National Soaring Landmark of the National Soaring Museum, listed by the City of San Diego as a Historic Site, listed on the California Register of Historic Places, and also as the first gliderport on the National Register of Historic Places for the many inventions, famous pilots, and record setting performances made there in all of these disciplines. This effort to help preserve the site for future generations was led largely by members of the TPG and another AMA club that shares the site, the Torrey Pines Scale Soaring Society (TPSSS). Later in 2003, as the AMA's National Aeromodeling Historic Landmark Program was initiated by TPGer Gary Fogel (later retitled the National Aeromodeling Heritage Program), Torrey Pines was selected as the first site in the program. Depending on wind conditions, TPG flies a variety of model aircraft at Torrey from small discus launch gliders and scale models to larger F3F slope racing sailplanes and scale model sailplanes, given the big air space, good lift, and large landing zone. While many slope races have been held at the site over the years, the site is now more commonly used just for fun flying, given the aerial traffic, as safety is the primary consideration.

During the 1970s and 1980s, TPG members also helped promote RC soaring in general through various trade magazines with Larry Fogel as the regular RC soaring columnist for *Model Builder* magazine, Al Doig and Don Edberg as the RC soaring columnists for *Radio Control Modeler* magazine, and others writing articles about their RC soaring designs for *Flying Models* and other publications. Other members Mark Smith and Larry Jolly helped promote the use of model aircraft in the movie industry. Mark Smith's wonderful foam flying RC seagulls were flown at Torrey Pines and Maui for the filming of the 1973 movie *Jonathan Livingston Seagull*.

During the 1970s, TPG members also began participating heavily in the rise of competitive RC thermal soaring. While initially beginning at inland sites such as Hourglass Field in Mira Mesa, a variety of sites have been used by the club for this purpose over time. Members distinguished themselves as champions in this area including Kelly Pike, Randy Warner, Buck Faure, Alex Mladineo, Mark Smith, Don Edberg, Al Doig, Bob Torres, Keith Finkenbiner, and many others. These pilots helped in the formation of a variety of thermal soaring contest formats, as well as helping to promote the soaring achievement program offered by the League of Silent Flight (LSF). Club members helped advance new aircraft designs and new control systems. Within thermal soaring the club also helped launch a popular 2-meter wingspan (Class B) in the 1980s, and in the 1990s the club helped pioneer interest in competitive hand launch soaring (Class A) through the annual International Hand Launch Glider Festival (IHLGF) in Poway, a popular

competition that continues to advance the state-of-the-art and helped establish FAI F3K as an international discipline.

The TPG currently operates three club fields: the Torrey Pines Gliderport, the Encinitas Flight Center, and the Poway Flight Center. As noted, Torrey Pines is for slope soaring while Encinitas and Poway are for thermal duration soaring. Given Torrey Pines is considered a motorless flight park by the City of San Diego, no motorized aircraft are allowed. The same is true of our Encinitas field, which makes use of winches or hi-starts for the launching of aircraft. At Poway, the field is also restricted to soaring only, however electric sailplanes with motors used only for the launch phase are allowed (FAI F5J) in addition to winch or hi-start launch. Poway is also internationally famous for its association to discus launch gliding (DLG) and FAI F3K.

The club has traditionally included a mix of laypersons simply interested in the joy of flight as well as professionals from the local aerospace industry. Membership typically includes a cross-section of all ages from students to retirees. Given the outstanding weather conditions in San Diego and a large and diverse club with access to three flying sites, the TPG has a way of generating highly skilled pilots for national and international competition. The club newsletter, *Gull Wings*, has been published on a regular basis since 1971, and the club has been highlighted in magazines, books, and podcasts. It was featured in November 2020 as AMA Club of the Month. TPG is incorporated as a non-profit in the State of California and holds regular virtual meetings and welcomes newcomers to join in the fun of flying RC sailplanes. Our members continually reach out to the local community to help with aerospace and STEM education.

Gary Fogel  
TPG Historian, January 2023

Additional links and references

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*A half-century of soaring: Torrey Pines Gulls glider club celebrates 50 years of flying over La Jolla*, Elisabeth Frausto, November 30, 2020, <https://www.lajollalight.com/news/story/2020-11-30/a-half-century-of-soaring-torrey-pines-gulls-glider-club-celebrates-50-years-of-flying-over-la-jolla>

*The 2022 International Hand Launch Glider Festival*, Gary Fogel, May 27, 2022, <https://medium.com/rc-soaring-digest/the-2022-international-hand-launch-glider-festival-5e3ebe80fa57>

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*Wind and Wings: The History of Soaring in San Diego*, Gary Fogel, 2000,  
<https://www.amazon.com/Wind-Wings-History-Soaring-Diego/dp/0967033950>

*The Torrey Pines Gliderport*, Images of America series, Gary Fogel, 2014,  
<https://www.amazon.com/Torrey-Pines-Gliderport-Gary-Fogel/dp/1531676081>

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