



Ascent**VARIO**

There are many different types of soaring pilots, and a different class of flight instrument that's appropriate for each.

Ascent Products, of LaVerne, California, has developed an instrument that seems to solve this problem. It combines the small size of a beeper vario with a just-big-enough LCD display that shows the altitude, average climb rate, temperature, and time.

The Ascent Vario is essentially a basic variometer that is small enough to wear like a watch, and operates with the kind of menu-driven system you would expect to see in the age of the iPod. Here are some of the features:

Temperature corrected, user calibrated altitude. You can toggle between absolute and relative altitude in flight.

Audio rate-of-climb indicator, with customizable tone and five volume settings.

Average rate-of-climb display. You can set the average to any interval between one and 64 seconds.

Adjustable sink alarm.

A "suppressor" that can keep the audio off until you have left the ground. Some people like their vario to make noise while they're waiting to launch, and some don't.

An internal log book that can store basic data for up to 200 flights and load it into your computer.

The accessories that come with the vario

are as minimalist as its design. A single cable and two small adapters enable you to recharge it from a wall outlet, a car's cigarette lighter, or your computer's USB port. The lithium polymer battery is supposed to work for up to ten hours of flight time, so as long as you can get near a computer, a car, or a wall once every few days, the Ascent should be able to keep beeping on a road trip of any length.

I took the Ascent for several test flights during this review, some on a paraglider and some on a hang glider. The ergonomics worked fine on both wings, though while hang gliding, I did have to get used to reading the display sideways. The audio tone and response was similar to most other varios I have used, so it was easy to get used to sniffing out the weak lift. The real advantage of the Ascent vario, I found, is simply in having the basic functions that I want (altimeter, averager, audio, logbook) in a package so light and unobtrusive, it almost isn't there.

Touch the upper left button and you'll see the current time and your flight duration for about five seconds. The upper right button will reveal your maximum height and best rate of climb, the lower right one brings up your altitude relative to launch and the temperature, and the lower left one can change the beep volume. A glance at the altimeter and averager every 30 sec-

onds or so gives plenty of information, and doesn't distract you in your search for the next thermal.

The Ascent Products website offers a handy software application. The Ascent Control program lets you view your logbook data onscreen and fine tune the vario settings. A recent firmware upgrade now allows users to record and download the entire flight track in user selectable increments. The Ascent Control software currently works only with a PC, not a Mac. I would expect this to be corrected soon.

The buttons have a sort of loose feel to them. I am not a button expert, however; they might last forever.

The Velcro wrist strap works fine now, but Velcro wears out and wrist straps get stinky. A slight redesign could make the strap easy to replace and thus improve comfort and security years down the road.

As the years go by, I seem to lean more toward simplicity in my flying than toward high levels of functionality. The Ascent Vario strikes an excellent compromise, eliminating the need to mount an instrument while retaining the most important (in my view) functions of a vario. As soon as I can buy a tiny GPS to wear on my other wrist, life will be complete.

For more information, check out the Ascent Products website: <http://www.ascentvario.com/> 