



Trainee glider pilots Alexandra Thompson, 12, from Napier, and Hastings 14-year-olds Ryan Maney and Hamish Ross have helped drag down "considerably" the average membership age at Gliding Hawke's Bay, based at Hastings Aerodrome at Bridge Pa. The youngsters are taking full advantage of subsidies currently available from the local club and Gliding NZ as they aim to qualify as solo pilots. Photo: CLINTON LLEWELLYN

Youngsters impress with gliding mastery

By CLINTON LLEWELLYN

At age 12 Alexandra Thompson cannot sit her learner drivers' test for another four years – yet loves being in control of a glider with no engine nearly 9000ft above the ground.

What's more, Alexandra has only been gliding for six months and if she gets her way, she will become the country's youngest solo glider pilot in the same short amount of time.

Gliding Hawke's Bay club instructor Grant Jarden said Alexandra would be the youngest solo pilot in the country the club was aware of, if she qualified by age 12.

He believed it was only a matter of time.

"If she is not flying solo in two month's time, there's something wrong. She is a natural," Jarden said.

He said Alexandra and Hastings trainee pilots Ryan Maney and Hamish Ross, both 14, had helped drag down the average age of the club's "ancient" membership "considerably".

As part of a local and national push to get more young people involved in gliding, Jarden said the club was paying for half the tow-plane fees for young trainee pilots aged 18 and under – which normally cost \$8 a minute and could range anywhere from 7 to 12 minutes for a usual take-off. Use of a club glider and instructors' time was free, he said, while Gliding NZ sub-

sidies also meant the normal \$250 membership fee for trainee glider pilots was currently being waived for people 18 and under.

Jarden said youngsters like Alexandra and Ryan, who joined the club at age 12 and is also aiming to qualify as a solo glider by December, and Hamish, a member for only a month, had proved to be quick learners.

"It's quite mind-blowing. They are picking it up [gliding] a hell of a lot quicker than adults do.

"I am getting a lot of satisfaction teaching them – when I fly with them I don't do anything any more. I am just along for the ride," he said.

Young people interested in gliding can contact the club at glidinghb.co.nz