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Coming Out of the Woods:

Having Fun *Safely* in the Backcountry

No question about it, flying in the backcountry is a lot of fun. Keeping it fun requires keeping it safe, and that's a subject that could easily fill a library shelf. So when *FAA Safety Briefing* asked me to write about backcountry safety, I knew that I didn't want to just rehash information we all know is so critically important to safe backcountry flying — things like density altitude, mountain flying considerations, short field and soft field landing and takeoff techniques, and other such topics. Instead, I had in mind a challenge that has become increasingly obvious as we build up the backcountry inventory here in Arizona. I'm talking about a safety issue that you might not recognize until you start to fly in the backcountry. It specifically involves a lesson we all get during training for the very first pilot certificate, the rule (14 CFR 91.103) stating that "Each pilot in command shall, before beginning a flight, become familiar with all available information concerning that flight."





When “All Available” Is “Zero”

It sounds so simple, but the more I worked with fellow pilots on organizing events at sometimes little-known backcountry airstrips, the more I realized what a challenge gathering “all available information” can actually be for the backcountry pilot. That’s because the information gauge often reads “slim to none.” For example, there is one particular airstrip in Arizona that has a reputation of being the finest in the state. If I mentioned its name here, though, you’d be hard pressed to find *any* valuable written safety information. That’s right. Nothing. There is simply no information on length, prevailing winds, obstacles, or other considerations a pilot should take into account before attempting to land there.

A sad and chilling anecdote makes the point about how serious that lack of information can be. In the wrecked remains of a C-180 a few years ago, there was a magazine left open to a page describing what an incredible place this airstrip was, in addition to providing some accurate safety information. That magazine article may have constituted every scrap of “all available information” this pilot was supposed to have for this airstrip.

I have wondered whether more information could have prevented that accident. While challenging, this is a perfectly safe airstrip that even sees an occasional Bonanza. It was only when another accident occurred there, however, when the pilot community began to discuss it more openly. The story I heard over and over again went something like this: “Oh, he got caught in that downdraft that hangs out at the approach end. You just can’t drag it in there, ya know.”

Well, I confess: I didn’t know, and I’m willing to bet that many other pilots didn’t know, either. It was around this time I began to realize the magnitude of the challenge that exists in finding important and accurate information on some of these little gems. If you are a backcountry pilot, you’ve heard from your friends about these airstrips, the ones that don’t have an identifier, aren’t on AirNav, and certainly aren’t listed in the Airport/Facility Directory (A/FD). Think about that for a second. Have you ever tried to hold an event at an airstrip where there is no published Common Traffic Advisory Frequency (CTAF)?

Digging for Necessary Nuggets

I can hear the rumbling already: “Okay, Mark, you’ve defined a potential problem. So what’s the solution?” Bottom line: There are no silver bullets or easy solutions. Still, there are some common sense

things you can do to increase the amount of information you have on a backcountry airstrip before taking your chances on a glossy magazine photo.

First, check with your local pilot organizations, especially if you have a backcountry group. Here in Arizona, we have started publishing pamphlets that convey basic information such as a temporary CTAF for events held at the location, field length, elevation, and all the other items you’d expect in the A/FD. Our pamphlets also include contact information for those airstrips that require prior permission. These documents are available through the Arizona Pilot’s Association (www.AZPilots.org). The Utah Backcountry Pilots group also provides excellent information on its website, as do our sister organizations in Idaho and Montana. Simply put, these organizations are a great model for those in areas just growing their backcountry inventory.

Very often, your local backcountry organization will also be able to recommend a CFI with local backcountry experience. Rather than just talk to that CFI, though, why not make your first flight into the target airstrip a dual flight with the expert in the right seat? That is exactly what I did before attending my first backcountry fly-in at the Negrito airstrip in the Gila National Forest in New Mexico, and I’m very glad I made that decision.

Another idea is to check in with one of the national organizations such as the Recreational Aviation Foundation (www.TheRAF.org). Other good places to check include www.backcountrypilots.org and www.shortfield.com, the latter of which offers one of the best overall databases available

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today. And don't forget to check with the aviation or aeronautics division of your state's Department of Transportation. Some now maintain a database on airstrips, including backcountry or auxiliary landing fields.

Still another source is the land manager, if the airstrip is located on public land. For example, the Spotted Bear District of the Flathead National Forest in Montana offers an informational pamphlet about the airstrips located within this district. You can find these documents by contacting the District Office, the Montana Pilots' Association, or the Recreational Aviation Foundation (RAF). And, of course, the obvious source of first-hand information for a private airstrip is the land owner.


And for a great overview, one of the most exhaustive sources of information is Galen Hanselman, author of books like *Fly Idaho*, *Fly the Big Sky*, *Fly Utah*, and *Air Baja*.

Be Smart, and Do Your Part

The long term solution to this challenge is beginning to unfold as backcountry aviation comes out of the woods, so to speak, and becomes more of a mainstream recreational activity and method of access to public lands across the country. With this trend emerging, there is now a lot more open discussion about those sometimes elusive, but impor-

tant, pieces of information about a particular airstrip. You can do your part by becoming part of your local backcountry organization, as well as a national organization such as the RAF.

If nothing else, I hope you'll think twice before landing at a backcountry airstrip when all you have is hearsay, or a fellow pilot telling you only that "I went in there. It's no problem!" The fact that another pilot survived the experience doesn't even begin to provide the information needed to ensure that you survive it as well. Also consider that the full picture on a backcountry airstrip's characteristics can only develop over time, through many operations at various times of day and season. And don't neglect to learn from the mistakes of others. When there have been accidents or incidents at an airstrip, a study of these events will almost always be valuable in providing data on particular issues at that airstrip.

Finally, doing your part means sharing what you know. If you have, or over time gather information from your own research and experience, you may have a start on a safety pamphlet that you can make available to others. 

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Photo by Stefanie Spencer

