On Approach

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IN SEARCH OF FALL COLORS

RISKS AND REWARDS

By Jason Blair ATP, CFI-I, MEI-I, FAA Designated Pilot Examiner, AGI

A fall color tour is a treat that many pilots have on their yearly must-do flight list. In many areas of the country the wooded areas alight with spectacular scenery that is beautiful from the ground, and even more amazing from the air.

Whether you are taking this color tour in Maine, over the Rockies, in Northern Michigan, Wisconsin, or Minnesota, or in the higher terrain features of the Appalachian Mountains, a color tour can be one of the most memorable flights a pilot, and their chosen passengers, take every year.

The fall season will see a return to better aircraft performance with cooler temperatures, which might also make the cabin temperatures more enjoyable after summer flying. It might be a good excuse for a weekend away to visit a cider mill or for some fall hiking. And it just might be a great way to spend a Saturday afternoon as the sun goes down over the forest. Timing those flights for peak color visibility can take a little planning, and a little luck with weather, but is rewarding when it all works out.

There are a few things a pilot might want to think about when trying to make all things line up to enhance safety considerations.

Lowering Ceilings in Rising Terrain

Frequently, chasing the best colors will find a pilot seeking out hilly or mountainous areas where colors may be changing sooner than at lower altitudes due to cooler temperatures. Consider this carefully when traveling into rising terrain. Even just a couple thousand feet of terrain climbing can change the conditions in which a pilot will be flying. Many areas see fall weather systems that generate cloud decks that hang over areas. If you are going up in terrain, it doesn't mean that the cloud deck will also be rising. This can box a pilot in between terrain and a cloud deck when flying into rising terrain reducing the clearance between the ground elevation and the MSL cloud deck layer. Keep this in mind as you fly in search of the best colors, or, try to catch that clear day when there are no clouds. Watch the weather and pick a day that is going to not force you into flying at lower altitudes than are safe, or with which you are comfortable. If the weekend weather isn't cooperating for you, do you really have to tell anyone at work where you were that mid-weekday you called in sick? A mental health day to go flying seems pretty justifiable to me. I will leave you to make your own choices.

Higher Minimum Altitudes in Some Wilderness Areas

Some of our country's most beautiful, desolate, and best places to view fall colors also have special airspace restrictions. This is especially true

for minimum altitudes. Be sure to check the VFR sectional chart to see if any of the areas you might be visiting require you to fly with higher minimum altitudes. While it might be great to get low and see those leaves up close, in some places this is discouraged or even prohibited.

Low Altitudes over Areas with Few Emergency Landing Options

Related to that, the desire to fly low over the leaves and get a close look may put you at an altitude and in a location where an emergency leaves you with no options other than to end up in the trees. Be aware of the risks that come with flying low over terrain where few emergency options exist. Good practices might include flying higher, not introducing potential failure-inducing changes such as fuel tank switches while in these areas (which might require some planning ahead) or flying on the edges of such areas instead of over the middle of them. A little planning can go a long way in keeping options available should a rare emergency occur.

The Return of Low Level Icing

While your color tour is probably intended to be a VFR endeavor, getting to where you will be seeing the magnificent natural displays may find you traveling IFR. With the onset of fall and cooler temperatures, we have to again start thinking of icing potential and risk at lower altitudes that we may have gotten used to in our recent summer flying endeavors. Be sure to check on freezing levels and keep an eye out for any PIREPs about icing conditions if your travel to or from your viewing area might put you in the clouds, and potentially icing conditions.

Fall color tours by aircraft remain one of my favorite things to do every year. It is truly one of the most spectacular natural displays pilots have the opportunity to take advantage of that all of those poor non-pilots don't get to experience. Too bad for them!

Jason Blair is an active single- and multi-engine instructor and an FAA Designated Pilot Examiner with over 6,000 hours total time, over 3,000 hours instruction given, and more than 3,000 hours in aircraft as a DPE. In his role as Examiner, over 2,000 pilot certificates have been issued. He has worked for and continues to work with multiple aviation associations with a focus on pilot training and testing. His experience as a pilot and instructor spans nearly 20 years and includes over 100 makes and models of aircraft flown. Jason has published works in many aviation publications, a full listing of which can be found at www.jasonblair.net.

READ THE ROOM; TAKE THE HINT

By Jason Blair ATP, CFI-I, MEI-I,
FAA Designated Pilot Examiner, AGI

The aviation community is a small world. In this environment, we each have the opportunity for positive influence on fellow pilots if we choose to use it. We particularly have a duty to influence each other in a positive way when it comes to safety. The examples we set may speak louder than words because another pilot may use our actions as a model for their own aeronautical behavior.

Too often, there are many factors pushing us forward. But that should be a signal to stop and think about the impact of our decisions, not only for ourselves and our own passengers, but also for pilots and passengers who happen to be watching us. Remember, we should never test our limitations merely to meet a perceived "need" to proceed.

PRESSURE TESTING

The sense of external pressure often comes with hints, both subtle and explicit, that we need to carefully identify and evaluate. Safety publications often focus heavily on obvious things, like "get-there-itis," that can arise on a family or business trip. But I have seen significant pressure mounting for other reasons as well.

For instance, pilots these days may feel great pressure to build flight time for an airline job or to meet requirements for a scheduled practical test (check ride). The flight training providers are being pressured to turn out more pilots and at a quicker pace to fill the demand for air carrier pilots. Flight instructors are under pressure to "get their hours" as soon as possible to be eligible for Airline Transport Pilot (ATP) certificates (restricted-ATP minimum or traditional ATP minimum requirements). In some cases, these flight instructors are being pressured by airline hiring departments to get hours however they can — and as fast as they can — to meet new-hire class date expectations.

I fear that some flight instructors are, therefore, taking students into conditions inappropriate both in terms of safety and learning effectiveness. Apart from being counterproductive as an instructional method, this practice can send a silent — but nonetheless loud and clear — message that students should push their own limits and fly in conditions that pilots without those pressures would choose to avoid.

Some training facilities already recognize this issue. One flight instructor I know observed that "we are doing too much teaching in the air and not enough on the ground just so we complete more hours in the air." The results of this approach are predictable. A training operation in my area experienced "damage" in eight individual moments over a 10-month period. Fortunately, no one was hurt, but incident re-

views indicated that flight crews, instructors, and students were all pushing to "get flights done" in conditions that were, at best, marginal for both instructional effectiveness and overall safety.

TURN DOWN THE HEAT

Regardless of the reason for the pressure to fly, train yourself to stop and consider the possible (even likely) consequences of pushing the limits. Remember that a conservative approach will more likely result in a positive outcome. Be wary of (allegedly) "no big deal" temptations. It might "just" be exceeding a crosswind limit, but you could wind up with a runway excursion and possibly damaging runway lights and your airplane. It's better to wait for a day with crosswinds less than 75% or even 50% of the maximum demonstrated capability of the aircraft.

Here's an example from a practical test I conducted not long ago. The applicant had chosen to fly on a relatively windy day. Winds were mostly down the runway in use, but there were gusts between 20–25 knots. The applicant's power-off 180-degree accuracy approach and landing was clearly going to come up short of the designated touchdown point, potentially even short of the runway. When I had to ask the applicant to add power and either go around or transition to a normal landing, of course, my safety intervention resulted in a Notice of Disapproval for the applicant. During the debriefing, the applicant was somewhat indignant, asking whether I thought I could have done better in those conditions. My answer: "No. I wouldn't have even tried today."

LOOK AROUND!

I'm still not sure the applicant fully grasped the meaning of my response, but my point was simple. A pilot exercises good judgment and good aeronautical decision-making when they don't attempt demanding maneuvers in conditions that put the desired outcome in question. I might also note that this particular applicant had also failed to take other hints I had offered. First, before I traveled to the applicant's location, I queried whether we were going to proceed with the test in the forecasted conditions. Second, the applicant might have noticed that I arrived by car rather than by airplane, because I had concerns that conditions would be beyond my comfort zone for flying.

Hints don't just come from instructors or examiners. A pilot friend recently told me how an instructor from his airport had taken family members for a "fun" flight on a day when he and I had both chosen to stay on the ground. Flight conditions that day included winds already over 20 knots and forecasted to be beyond 35 knots by the time they expected to land. As my friend noted, "Why do I keep seeing a few people flying on days when most pilots I know stay on the ground?"

My friend decided to ask the instructor in question about what led him to a "go" decision. The answer? Family members were only in town for that one day and conditions were "technically VFR." Neither seemed like a good answer in the after-action evaluation of the decision chain. Did the instructor fail to notice that no other light GA aircraft were flying that day, either at that airport or at any nearby airports? For a safety-minded pilot, that fact should give you a strong hint that it's a good day to stay on the ground.

Humility goes a long way when it comes to safety. None of us are super pilots who can fly through anything. Many people who have been regarded as super pilots before us have met untimely ends when they pushed their own limits. We all need to take hints and think critically about mitigating risk for others and ourselves in our flying activities. You've heard about "reading the room" when you arrive at a business or social function. For flying, always remember to "read" the environment … and don't forget to peruse the fine print.

Jason Blair is an active single- and multi-engine instructor and an FAA Designated Pilot Examiner with over 6,000 hours total time, over 3,000 hours instruction given, and more than 3,000 hours in aircraft as a DPE. In his role as Examiner, over 2,000 pilot certificates have been issued. He has worked for and continues to work with multiple aviation associations with a focus on pilot training and testing. His experience as a pilot and instructor spans nearly 20 years and includes over 100 makes and models of aircraft flown. Jason has published works in many aviation publications, a full listing of which can be found at www.jasonblair.net.

CIVIL AIR PATROL: SAVING LIVES FASTER THAN EVER

Civil Air Patrol (CAP) has a rich history of volunteer service to our country that goes back to the early days of World War II when the Commerce, Navy and War departments first saw the need for civilian pilots to aid the Army Air Corps in a variety of wartime missions including courier services; towing targets, tracking operations, training military pilots and even a fleet of armed civilian aircraft to deter and report enemy submarines that were attacking merchant vessels off the Atlantic and Gulf coasts.

Of course, search-and-rescue was a major mission of CAP then, as it is now. Today, when CAP volunteers aren't saving lives locating downed aviators, lost hikers, stranded boaters and other people in distress, the organization is fulfilling its role in the U.S. Air Force's Total Force, joining the active-duty, guard and reserve forces as American airmen. The COVID-19 pandemic saw CAP's largest mobilization since World War II, involving more than 40 wings with missions as diverse as delivering PPE supplies and test kits, helping build and staff field hospitals, transporting vaccine vials as part of Operation Warp Speed and collecting more than 20,000 units of blood for Operation Pulse Lift.

CAP flies the world's largest fleet of single-engine piston aircraft: 540 (plus 45 gliders and 2 hot air balloons). Of Civil Air Patrol's 62,000 volunteer members, 28,000 are cadets: boys and girls between the ages of 12 and 18 who are getting an introduction to flying that they couldn't get any other way. Last year, CAP conducted more than 34,000 free orientation flights.

Additionally, each cadet gets up to five flights and if they want to go a step further, they can attend a week-long flight training academy that takes them from zero time to pre-solo. Cadets who have soloed and passed the written exam can apply for Cadet Wings to earn a private pilot certificate. The cost of Cadet Wings is covered by a grant from the Air Force or the Ray Foundation with no obligation to join the Air Force.

When most GA pilots think of Civil Air Patrol, they think of search and rescue. In 1973, when the FAA made emergency locator transmitters mandatory it improved CAP's search and rescue capabilities, but even with an ELT, it still could take hours or days to find a missing aircraft. Perhaps one of the most famous and tragic examples of how difficult it can be to find a downed pilot was the disappearance of billionaire adventurer and aviator Steve Fossett in a remote area of Nevada in 2007. A massive search was triggered with every bit of technology available at the time and dozens of aircraft from Civil Air Patrol and the Air National Guard. The Naval Air Station in nearby Fallon,

Nevada even sent HH-1N Huey helicopters with night-vision goggles. Unfortunately, Fossett and the wreckage weren't found until over a year later. Newer 406 MHz ELTs are tied into an aircraft's GPS and have dramatically improved on zeroing in on lost aircraft, though 406 MHz ELTs are still not required in the U.S. ADS-B has refined the search process further, but ADS-B alone can't locate a downed aircraft. That's why Civil Air Patrol has innovated several technologies to dramatically reduce the time to find lost aviators and improve their chances for survival.

Civil Air Patrol's National Operations Center, based at Maxwell Air Force Base, operates two teams that leverage technology to reduce the time from crash to rescue. CAP's National Radar Analysis Team (NRAT) uses ADS-B data to plot the probable crash location of missing aircraft. CAP's radar analysis team extrapolates data from automatic surveillance systems on aircraft, from military data, satellites, and private companies to analyze the flight path. The NRAT team, of highly trained Civil Air Patrol volunteers, manipulates the radar data supplied by the FAA to determine the probable location of missing aircraft, which also greatly reduces the time to find aircraft and helps save lives.

The most innovative technology CAP uses in search and rescue is cellphone forensics. While every aircraft may not be equipped with a modern 406 MHz ELT, it's not a stretch to say that virtually every aircraft has a cellphone onboard. Civil Air Patrol's Cellphone Forensics Team analysis reduces the search time from hours, days, and weeks to just minutes by providing a fairly precise probable search location.

CAP first used the process in 2006, during a search for a missing aircraft in Pennsylvania. Someone had contacted the cell carrier to request location information from the pilot's cellphone, but it turned out that some of the data was misinterpreted initially and the search was focused in the wrong area. Then CAP was called in. With proper analysis by CAP, the search plan was modified, and the pilot found. That first search using lifesaving cellphone-based search technology led to three additional missions in 2006 and six the following year.

Rapid location identification means that search teams no longer need to wait for daylight or a break in the weather to facilitate a rescue. The cell forensics process also allows CAP to communicate with survivors by text to help identify their location and physical condition even with insufficient cellular coverage to support a phone call. Today, the team members field more than 300 calls annually from the Air Force Rescue Coordination Center (AFRCC) to request data from cell carriers. Analysis by these trained volunteer professionals provides probable search areas, which are communicated to local search and rescue organizations, sheriffs' offices, federal agencies, and other requestors.

CAP has been on the leading edge of saving lives more than 90 years. As lifesaving technology evolves you can bet that CAP will, too.

To learn more about CAP, to find a squadron near you and to join CAP, visit gocivilairpatrol.com

READBACK

Readback is your chance to tell us what you think about everything we have to say and do – including our PIREPs, articles, emails and previous issues of the *On Approach* newsletter. Content has been or may be edited for length and style before publication.

RESPONSES TO "INSURING TO VALUE"

Great article on valuation of your aircraft, especially the explanation of the implications of declared value on the company's determination of total loss.

--Don Martin

That is an excellent article and is long overdue. I am the tech person for the International Comanche Society and I run into the problem of underinsured planes constantly. However, one reason for this is where an owner has financed his purchase and his lender requires there be insurance which will cover the loan repayment in the case of a loss. I recently saw a Comanche 260, for example, which had a market value of around $130,000 with insurance hull coverage of $50,000. That owner would have been better to carry liability only since the hull was grossly underinsured.

--Patric Barry

Thank you for that information on proper hull value insurance. Providing information on how you determine a total loss was informational and valuable for me. Let everyone decide for themselves what risks they want to take. Then no one can complain if a claim should happen. Also, thanks for providing help in determining the proper market value of our airplane. I appreciate that offer and will use it for the next renewal.

--Ron Cybulski

RESPONSES TO "WHAT HAPPENS TO YOUR PASSENGERS IF SOMETHING HAPPENS TO YOU?"

I found the article on the Non-Pilot Companion Course quite interesting. I am the President of the Cirrus Owners and Pilots Association Safety and Education Foundation, and we put on a series of Cirrus Pilot Proficiency Programs around the world. This year we are putting on our 250th such CPPP. A class that is always given is what we call the Partner in Command Class. In it we provide information similar to what is presented in the Non-Pilot Companion Course although we emphasize the use of the Cirrus Airplane Parachute System. After the three hour didactic session, the Partners spend an hour practicing what they learned in the simulators we use at the CPPP. The program is well received.

--Jerrold Seckler

Another superb Pirep that I've often thought about. Not so much for myself, but for others who often fly with their spouses. I'd say I fly most of the time alone and when I do fly with someone, it is either another pilot or someone who would be flying with me just for a ride. However I do believe every pilot who flies with his spouse or with anyone regularly should take advantage of this course as it could mean the difference between survival and disaster.

--Junaid Adil

This is the best of your PIREP series. My wife of 55 years is slowly opening up to this possibility, but she is really freaked out about it. I bought the E.S.P. CheckMate Emergency Substitute Pilot and keep it in the aircraft in view near the windscreen. I modified it to look like the present panel configuration and instruments. I have gone over it with her in detail. But she is still apprehensive. I hope this changes. I showed her the PIREP and hope she agrees to take the BPT Companion course.

--Thomas Hebda

COMING TO A HANGAR NEAR YOU!

The most fun we have all year is meeting you in person and strengthening our ties within the aviation community.

Avemco will be exhibiting at the following aviation tradeshows and more in 2023:

OCTOBER 24-26
NAFI Summit
Sun 'n Fun Campus
Lakeland, FL

NOVEMBER 3
Aviation Education & Career Expo
Leesburg Executive Airport (JYO)
Leesburg, VA

Events subject to change. Please visit our website and follow us on social media for more information and updates on these events as they become available.

With 4.8 stars, see what our customers are saying about us on TrustPilot!

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