

At what cost?

by Jim Neely



Photo taken from the air. USFWS/Jim Neely.

ALASKA. The great outdoors. The last frontier. Teeming waters and abundant wildlife. The chance for that great trophy of a lifetime and the bonus of a full freezer. Sound familiar? Maybe that is precisely what drew you to the 49th state. Sounds great to me, but wait a minute. “What price are you willing to pay to fulfil those dreams?”

Much of Alaska’s dreams are found at the end of an aircraft flight. Many sportsmen hire air taxi operators to transport them to remote sites throughout the state. By and large, most of the air taxi operators are true professionals who do a great job of accessing risk. In fact, I hear enough stories from disappointed hunters about setting on the ground because the pilot wouldn’t fly on a “marginal” day, to know most are flying within their limits. After all, a person can’t keep an air taxi operation in business long if they are bending up planes and passengers on a regular basis.

But how about the private aircraft owner? Federal Aviation Administration records show there are 10,805 active pilots and 9,902 registered aircraft flying in Alaska. Most of these are private pilots with personal aircraft. In 2005, there were 131 aircraft accidents in Alaska. 107 of those accidents, including 8 fatalities, involved general aviation aircraft. To their credit, commercial air carriers had no fatalities.

All pilots are taught to assess risk before each and every flight. It’s a matter of survival. Examine the plane, check the weather, evaluate your piloting

skills, and consider your current mental and physical condition. Then, do it all again just to be sure you haven’t missed anything. So why are we bending up so many aircraft in Alaska in August and September every year? I would suggest it is because we don’t ask ourselves, “At what price?”

Last August I spent a night on the mountain waiting out a party of hunters who decided to play the odds. The party had landed a Super Cub in a closed area of the refuge. After locating the plane from the air, I helicoptered in to wait out the group.

The low-time pilot had landed his Super Cub on a piece of gravel in a deep narrow canyon near the face of a glacier. According to him, he scouted the area a number of times pre-season and located a band of rams. He talked about bringing his girlfriend along on one of the trips and landing in there. After “taking care of business” with the pilot and his two hunting companions, I left with the understanding he would be gone before sunset. I flew back over the area that evening and discovered the pilot’s Super Cub minus the propeller. Once I got him up on the emergency channel, I found out he had put the cub on its nose on his last landing, bending the prop. He and his aircraft mechanic partner were straightening the prop between a couple rocks. I hung around the area for about an hour and watched them climb aboard and take-off after completing their “field-repair.”

Talk about the lack of risk assessment. The funny thing is when I had talked to the young pilot that morning about taking this risk over a sheep, he laughed it off and boasted about his confidence. Seems this wasn’t the first time he had bent up his cub though, as it was wearing a yellow left wing on an otherwise black airframe. When I brought the obvious previous accident to his attention, he explained it as “no big deal.”

I wonder if his girlfriend’s family would have seen it that way if he would have bent it up showing off his superior mountain aviator skills? Besides the fines for illegal aircraft operations, the pilot suffered a 90-day suspension of his aircraft license. Had he killed a sheep and transported it in the Super Cub, he would have been walking to his next hunt. Something to think

about!

The point of this is, I hope before you take-off for the mountains this fall you will ask yourself “At what cost?” I’m not suggesting to park the plane, but I am very much recommending you weigh that desire to go where no man has gone before against the realities that may go along with that decision.

One last comment about preflight planning. Be sure to check on the legality of flight operations along your intended route. Regulations differ among land management agencies. The Kenai National Wildlife Refuge has detailed maps and a pilot’s guide to aircraft operations that is available upon request. Before

flying on the refuge, I highly recommend you give us a call at 907/262-7021, or stop by the Refuge Visitor’s Center, on Ski Hill Road, and pick-up a copy.

Have a safe and enjoyable hunting season and be sure to count the costs when assessing the risks. See you up there!

Jim Neely is a refuge officer with the Kenai National Wildlife Refuge. He lives in Soldotna with his wife Faye and their English Setter Ammo. They enjoy hunting, fishing, flying, and worshipping with friends at the Soldotna Bible Chapel. Previous Refuge Notebook columns can be viewed on the Web at <http://www.fws.gov/refuge/kenai/>.