

AOPA Southern Safari

Part 2: Airstrips not far away

FRIDAY WAS A LIVELY evening with the new arrivals only then being able to relax properly knowing their aeroplanes had all been tied down and covered. Bad weather in the North Island prevented many from making it south, but a total of 67 aircraft made this trip. A nice assortment of food completed the total refuelling package for that day.

Saturday dawned calm and clear with about 8 degrees of frost. There was much activity untying aircraft with many of the taildragers turned tail into the sun to help melt the quite thick frost. Following a decent breakfast, some tried to start engines but usually with little luck. It was just too cold for a cold soaked carburettor engine.

A good briefing at 0900 hrs covered all aspects of the rally. Marked on a map was the location of all the airstrips that were available — over 50 in number and as far south as Stewart Island. With many small strips (some with a limited number of landings permitted) and such a large number of aircraft, a realistic system for aircraft control had been devised.

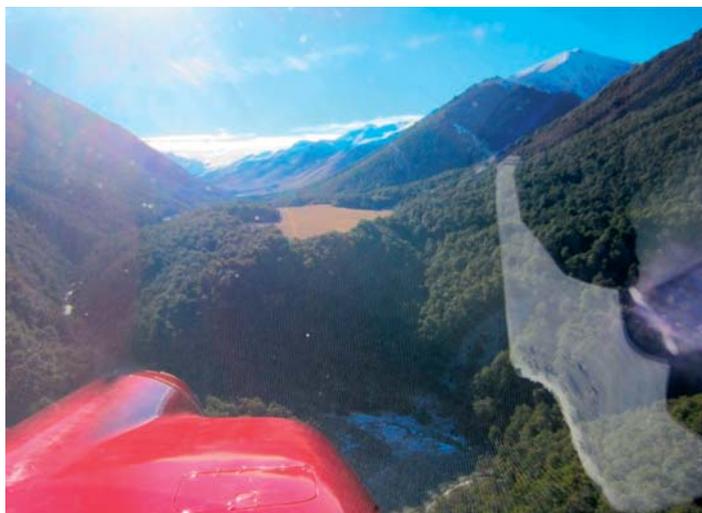
Airstrips had been selected generally into block areas so distances between strips was not great, thus localising the different areas of activity. Each of these airstrip listings had an experienced lead pilot, about eight in total, who was very familiar with the allocated strips.

Each pilot could select a preference and add his or her registration to a block airstrip listing on a whiteboard so a reasonable balance with the numbers could be seen by all. The allocated lead pilots then individually briefed their specific pilots on the special issues for each strip and those who were new to the area could then mark the strip locations on to their charts.

Some strips were one-way — in and out from the same end. This all seemed to work out well as it was not follow-the-leader but generally find your own way and meet up on some of the strips. This gave pilots the chance to plan beforehand and determine if they were comfortable with their aircraft and their ability on the individual strips. Some chose to bypass some of the strips on their listing.

Before leaving the briefing, all pilots and passengers were supplied with a packaged lunch which included food, a juice drink and fruit, definitely a healthy lunch for aviators.

That was the planning part taken care of while the frost melted oh so slowly. Then it was fun and games



Standing out well in the beech forest is Cotters strip ...



Alistair McLachlan report and photographs
SAA SP 1223/AACA0108

Sunset at Omarama in fine, calm weather looks all very pretty ... but unless the wings are covered there's no going anywhere in a hurry next morning, even if a carburetted engine can be persuaded into life.



trying to start engines. A portable ground power generator was transferred from aircraft to aircraft to boost the onboard battery which often just couldn't deliver enough to get a start. The priming system just resulted in raw fuel draining out of the carburettor with insufficient vaporisation to light the fire.

(Yes, Phil Kennedy, the cars around appeared to have no starting problems.)

I think it was around 1100 hrs before the last of the engines lit off. With ZK-WEC we started with little trouble by doing a little crafty pre-warming of the carburettor and engine. On these trips Graeme Weck always carries a decent survival kit — food, cooking equipment etc — so we had only to add our sleeping bags and we would have been OK for several days. The Murphy Rebel is designed so the two seats can be repositioned to enable onboard sleeping for two.



... where discussion take place about the next landing and cold feet.



Planning at Dingleburn, Lake Hawea. This strip is idyllic in such weather but needs care and attention in a stiff westerly.

The calm clear weather continued all day so made the flying in the valleys a doddle.

We departed for our first strip, Ahuriri, only a few minutes away near the river of the same name. This was a long very flat strip with a good sized superphosphate bin and next to the road.

After a general chat with those who chose to land it was then on to Cotters in the Hunter River valley, the next major system to the west and draining into Lake Hawea. This strip was at a greater altitude, and with a gentle slope surrounded with beautiful virgin bush it was idyllic.

It was here while we stood around in the sun talking that I became aware of the frozen ground. You could feel it sucking out the warmth from your feet. You tend to notice this after living north of the Bombays for some years. It would have been nice to explore the area but when you are time limited you must keep going.

I should add the very smart yellow Rans S7 greased in and out of this strip two-up and looked right at home among the gaggle of Cessnas, Pipers and Murphys.

Next it was down Lake Hawea and on to the Dingleburn for lunch, the home strip for Guy and Davida Mead. And what a strip — gently sloping, very large with very short grass. The hosts were away in their aeroplane taking the opportunity to fly into other AOPA arranged strips. I liked the hangar well lowered into the ground. One could guess at the winds that could blast down the valley.

After lunch Graeme and I had a look at the original homestead, built in the early style with the wood and stone framing, thin horizontal slats and clay packed for insulation. The wooden shingles looked quite effective.

The next stop was Boundary, an area of grass among the matagouri with a nice mountain river at the stopping end. A little explore then on to Wind Pudding just a few minutes further up the valley. On short final we were advised to avoid the cow pats. Very large healthy cattle deposit equally large healthy piles of dung and as these are dropped hot on to frozen ground in a short time they take on the consistency of an immovable rock as they freeze to the surface. It is unwise to kick or attack one with an aircraft wheel.

The longish but very light fine grass appeared to have no effect on the takeoff performance of any aeroplanes, including the tricycle geared models with wheel spats.

We had another chat here to wise up on the next landing, an area of similar fine grass growing on a surface of fine gravel just above the shoreline of the current water level of Lake Hawea. Our flight leader, Mike Thomas, had

THE RV SERIES

BRV

200HP

RV10

MOST POPULAR KITPLANES IN THE WORLD

8453 COMPLETED IN MORE THAN 30 COUNTRIES, 65 IN NEW ZEALAND

WHY? SEE WWW.VANSAIRCRAFT.COM OR CALL 001-503-678-6545 **KIWI SPOKEN**



The Lake Ohau Lodge strip, on the shady side about two-thirds the way up the lake, is more obvious from the air than the road.

been in recently so we had some wheel tracks in the grass to follow. While this was a totally unprepared surface it was as smooth as the best of any created airfield.

With time marching on we next visited Morven Hills, beside the Lindis River on the southern approach to the pass. Our landings were assessed by several stags in the paddock next door, but they soon lost interest and wandered off as we discussed the next strip. Then it was a quick stop not far away, down the Lindis and around the corner at Geordie Hill.

Up again and a nice smooth approach over a tranquil Lake Ohau and on to the Ohau Lodge strip, next to the road and resembling an off-road track among the matagouri. As we descended on short final we entered the shade as the sun was below the western mountain tops. Again there was no wind, but with the sun gone the air was freezing and the frozen ground cooled one from the feet up. Time for some pictures and to admire the view, then up and away before the oil in the engines froze. (Maybe it wasn't quite that cold.)

Once airborne we climbed into a sunny sky and tracked up the lake to Glen Lyon, a nice smooth farm strip on the northeastern shore of Lake Ohau and still in the sun. As various other aircraft returning to Omarama spotted us we repositioned the parked aircraft till we had about 14 stacked in. Some chocking was necessary to prevent the odd aeroplane going bush all by itself.

Before the sun disappeared we all were up and away over the snowy mountains and back to Omarama. As per the previous day everyone slotted in for generally uneventful landings. We refuelled before covering and tying down, and as the sun went the temperature dropped. The warm building acted as a magnet after people completed the final bedding down of their machines.

With everyone back from the day's flying the AOPA executive conducted an interesting meeting with some points of real importance for all sport and recreational pilots, particularly the way many Crown land airstrips are being controlled with a view to exclude flying activity.

And just to keep the record straight: during the participation in this air rally some bugs were harmed and some pieces of grass were bent. But not a single tree, shrub, branch, leaf or rock was disturbed in our native bush and wilderness areas. I would defy anyone to track just where we had been.

Rounding off the day was a marvellous meal with all the food you could eat, well presented by mine host Mike and staff of the Countrytime Hotel.

Next morning a check out the window revealed a light dusting of snow had crept in during the night. The sun was hidden behind scruffy clouds and a cool southerly brought some blasts of fine gritty hail. Some blue sky was evident overhead and to the north.

We all took great interest in the actual and forecast weather and were able to supplement this with local knowledge from some of the experienced aviators.

Our plan to return via the West Coast definitely went out the window, so in very loose formation with Paul Finch in his similar Murphy Rebel and Geoff van Asch and younger son James in the Cessna 172 we took the easy way out, over Lake Benmore following the Waitaki River down towards the east coast.

The town of Waimate soon appeared and so did a nice sunny day with an occasional tuft of cumulus and next to no wind. It was a simple matter to follow the coast, enjoying the scenery and reviewing many areas that I knew so well from my fishing days. One can get nostalgic about the many salmon I used to catch in the good old days.

With a very obvious stationary grey-black wall of cloud and rain closing off our route just north of Ashburton the message was clear — stop here. So it was that Paul managed to find room in his home for four stranded flyers for the next two nights. The planes remained tucked away in Ian's lovely modern hangar so no worries with their safety. It was all much appreciated.

The next day Paul had to work tagging and monitoring dairy cows, so we all accompanied him to the Fairlie area, and while he worked we enjoyed ourselves in the town. I well remember the many times we used to travel by train to Fairlie, a past era now.

The day was quite an education and very interesting as we were able to become acquainted with some of the aspects of modern milk production. A cow's family tree can be more comprehensively tracked than that known by some humans.

On the Tuesday the weather north was nice and clear with some areas of light winds. So with full tanks we departed for a route Graeme and I were familiar with — through mountain valleys and into the Awatere River valley just east of Molesworth. Then it was a gentle downhill cruise down the valley to check out Frank Prouting's strip.

But we found no one home and so continued on to the coast, keeping out of the Blenheim region. A little westerly wind through Cook Strait this time spun the windmills a little faster. After refuelling at FoxPine we then had a very easy return back to Patumahoe.

I have purposely included some detail in this record knowing full well many will not have heard of many of these places that we visited. Believe me, there were many other equally interesting places that others did make it to on this AOPA organised trip. Some even experienced a snow landing on groomed snow.

So for those with their own aircraft, New Zealand is a beautiful place and your plane can take you to places well off the beaten track. Always ensure you have the landowner's permission first, though.

Of all the strips visited by us on the Saturday, none was further than 30 nautical miles by air from Omarama, so distances are not necessarily great.

At least two microlights were taking part in this adventure. I know there are several active microlight groups who organise similar if smaller-scale travels to different places; do participate when possible.

I thank Graeme Weck for the opportunity of sharing this trip and the AOPA for the extensive organising to make this all happen.