

Bird Watching (published in AircraftOwner.com April 2012)

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April. Finally. After a winter that seemed like it would never start for us here in the Midwest, we now are happy to see it behind us and gone.

The thoughts of April invariably bring thoughts of birds, but this year the thoughts are a bit more varied for me. I was able to take advantage of a friend's offer to spend part of early February on the west coast of south Florida. This is a pleasure that I have not experienced in the past, and it truly can become addictive. I can truly understand why all of those folks from the northern tier states settle in for the winter. But in addition to experiencing warm sunsets instead of cold snow-shoveling sessions, I delighted in watching birds - Pelicans, in particular.

I enjoy all aspects of aviation. I enjoy the precision required for competitive aerobatics, and the total freedom allowed to just watch the ground move under the wing. And I enjoy watching my fellow aviators executing landings while waiting to take off. (Admit it. We all enjoy judging other pilots.) So, I really enjoyed watching these experts show their stuff.

There were two types of pelicans present – brown pelicans, and white pelicans. And while they each certainly have a more scientific name, those names will suffice for me. They all tolerated one another, floating at ease with one another like a bunch of airport bums. I am sure

that they were arguing about who was flying over-weight, and whose fat carcass could get off of the water in the shortest space, and the location of the new \$100 fish-burger. And their takeoffs were definitely individual.

For some, a takeoff was executed by merely turning into the wind and flapping the wings a time or two. And then, gear up, as their fat feet were drawn up tight underneath their bodies. Others needed a bit more space. They would also give their wings a few flaps, but it was obvious that they were having some problems getting up to V-rotate. They were off of the water, but definitely not flying. For them, it took a bit of running across the top of the water before they reached lift-off speed.

Landings were also fun to watch. (An aside – When I took my instruction for my seaplane rating many years ago, I asked my instructor why we called the act of setting an airplane a paved or grass runway a “landing” but we did not call the similar act of placing a seaplane on the lake a “watering”. He had no answer, and so I will continue to refer to the pelicans' maneuvers as “landing”, although I never saw them on land.)

If there were no obstacles present, they performed their normal landing. This seemed to consist in a power-off approach, with wings fully extended, gear down trailing behind

to add a bit of drag, and no flaps. At about one foot or so off of the water, it is time to flare. The leading edge of the wing comes up, increasing the angle of attack, and the feet move from an in-trail position to a position which allows them to touch down on the water on the bottom of their feet. Body settles into the water, feet become paddles, and it is time to taxi to the dock and wait for fish parts to fall from the dock or from the sterns of the boats above.

But they also have a short field approach. This is the approach and splashdown technique required when the pelican's next meal is still alive and swimming and not coming off of the stern of a sport fishing boat. This approach begins with a low-level glide, about a foot above the water. When he sees his dinner swimming below, the pelican pulls back hard on the yoke into a power-on stall configuration. With an altitude gain of five to ten feet, both wings stall simultaneously. However, instead of releasing back pressure and adding power as we would do, he tucks one wing in and executes a perfect spin entry. With nose lowered to pick up airspeed, he tuck the other wing in and dives into the water, beak first, from an altitude of ten feet or so. Straight down, and then back up with fish in beak.

But while I am enjoying this aviation display, I am also thinking of how irritated I get with their homemaking habits. Apparently, they feel so much akin to our airplanes that they insist on using our planes as big bird houses. If your plane is parked outside, this is the time of year to dig

a little deeper under the cowling during pre-flight.

If you have never opened the cowling of your plane, make a date with your favorite mechanic and get a lesson on cowling opening. Some are easy, requiring only opening clips or executing a quarter turn on the hold-down screws. Others are one-piece, and entail unscrewing a large number of sheet metal screws and a second person to help remove the cowling.

My pre-flight technique for planes parked outside – If the cowling can be opened and not removed, I will open it on every preflight. If it must be removed to inspect the engine, I will peer into the engine compartment through the air intake (flashlight works here), and if I see the slightest bit of twigs or grass, the cowling is coming off. Birds love to get back behind the aft cylinders and start their building. And dig down a little bit, between the vanes of the cylinders. Those little homebuilders love to stuff their twigs, candy wrappers, cigarette butts and other fancy items all over in order to give themselves a firm foundation.

And don't stop looking at the front. When you get back to the tail, peer into the openings around the rudder and elevator. Those spots are good nesting locations as well.

Other news. I was leaving the house early in the morning on my way to meet my student at the airport, and my wife called out to me, "Did you see the article in the paper about the aircraft accident?" "No, I call back.

Leave it out and I will read it later.” Later, just before the local TV folks ask if they can come out and interview a pilot in front of a plane and get some comments, I look at the paper and see the type of article that I really, really don’t like to read.

It’s bad enough to read an article about an airplane that has crashed. It is worse when you see statements such as, “Witnesses on the ground stated that ‘the pilot and his passenger-friend were circling over our house so we could all wave to each other. And then the airplane just seemed to fall out of the sky’.”

I was asked, as part of the televised interview, “Why are airplanes so dangerous?” There is an easy answer, one that all of us who fly can provide. “Airplanes by themselves

are no more dangerous than any other piece of equipment; cars, trucks, motorcycles or fast boats. But when pilots operate them in ways that they are know are dangerous, they are unforgiving. Flying close to the ground at any airspeed, flying into the clouds, flying after a few beers or after taking medications, are all invitations for disaster.

My flying friends have heard me preach on this regularly. When we fly, we are taking all of our loved ones with us whether they are in the plane or not. Your actions in the plane affect all who know and love you.

Fly Safe. Don’t let us learn about your exploits through the media.

Chris Hope has taught fledgling and experienced pilots for nearly 40 years, mostly in the Kansas City area. Chris holds flight instructor certificates for single engine land and sea airplanes and multi-engine land planes, as well as for instrument training. He holds ground instructor certificates for advanced and instrument training. Chris is an FAA Gold Seal Instructor and a Master Certified Flight Instructor. Chris serves as a member of the FaaSTeam in the Kansas City area.