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A Cessna 170 performing a landing with the right combination of brakes and balance.

## **Flying Low & Slow In Alaska... Where Less Is More & Lower Is Better!**

*by Yasmina Platt*

I recently traveled to “The Last Frontier” (yes, you guessed it, Alaska!) for work. When I realized I was scheduled to be in Anchorage only a week after the annual Valdez Fly-In and Air Show (<http://www.valdezflyin.com/>), I booked an earlier flight and requested vacation time. I am so glad I did! The main day of the annual Talkeetna Fly-In (<http://www.abovealaska.com/flyin/>) was the day before my work engagement started as well, so I was able to attend both events and, of course, do a bit of flying while in both places. One cannot visit Alaska without taking to the skies!

Flying means different things to different people. However, aircraft are the lifeblood of Alaska; they are essentially “flying pickup trucks.” They often rotate between having bush wheels, floats, and skis throughout the year. Bush pilots fly in and around the backcountry, in a mostly roadless state, where only aircraft can provide access and bring supplies. They land on different kinds of airstrips, river gravel bars, roads, lakes, mountain tops, and glaciers, among other places.

Attending both fly-ins proved to be completely different experiences. While both offered the fairly typical fly-in events (airshow performances, a poker run, booths, food, etc.), the Valdez short-field take-off and landing (STOL) competition was the original (almost empty weight with minimum fuel and the pilot) demonstration, while the Talkeetna Fly-In was a gross-weight STOL competition, which represents more what bush pilots experience (multiple passengers and/or lots of gear). In addition, Valdez offered presentations, a balloon bust, flour bombing, and a “bonfire on the beach” flight run,

while Talkeetna included a scavenger/treasure hunt and a unicycle race. Ha!

The weather forecast for the weekend in Valdez was calling for a 90-100% chance of snow showers, but thankfully, it did not snow once and the ceilings were pretty good starting early Saturday afternoon. I later learned from the locals that weather forecasts in Alaska are normally wrong and are not to be trusted. It definitely proved that way throughout my time there.

Per STOL competition rules, takeoffs begin from the drawn starting line and judges measure where the main wheels leave the ground and, on landings, mains cannot touch down before the drawn line and distance is measured to where the mains stop. Both distances are combined to add up to a total score. Two runs are scored and the best of the two is entered. The lower, the better! All participants were very impressive to watch; however, only a few can win and set new records.

A beautiful Cons-Vult L-13 flown by Chuck Miller had a 238 score with a 101 ft take-off and a 137 ft landing in Valdez. A Maule 235 flown by Isaac Bedingfield won the Light Touring Class with a 183 score, composed of an 85 ft take-off and a 98 ft landing. The Light Sport Class achieved two new records: an 11 ft take-off and a 9.5 ft landing by Frank Knapp (who ultimately won the class and is seen on takeoff and landing below) and Dan Reynolds, respectively. Yes, those are not typos. My favorite, the Alternate Bush Class, was spearheaded by Toby Ashley with a Carbon Cub. His best run had a 29 ft takeoff and a 76 ft landing. Jacob Williams won the Bush Class (with nothing but Piper PA-18s) performing a 58 ft takeoff and a 78 ft landing. All classes were won by Alaskans, but believe it or not, Florida was well

represented as well.

The phrase “there are old pilots and there are bold pilots, but there are no old, bold pilots” very much applies in Alaska, too. Bush pilots are the rare breed I thought they were, but not the “cowboy pilots” I thought they would be. Total command of the aircraft is an absolute must, and risk mitigation, weighing situations carefully and making smart decisions, is a way of life.

While I did attempt to fly with all “landing gear modes” (big tires, skis, floats, and skids), I was not successful in achieving the skis one because it was too late in the season and the weather did not allow a lot of higher elevation flying. That’s ok; that gives me an excuse to come back at a better time.

As always, all aircraft provided different missions, experiences, vistas, adrenaline, etc., and each requires different skills. And I did get to land on a glacier – with a helicopter! That’s always a highlight for me. Landing on a glacier is just a special treat most places cannot offer. And the views from the helicopter are just like no other... Do I sound bias?

I had a first in this trip – flying a floatplane! I have a single-engine sea (SES) rating; however, I have always flown flying boats, never a floatplane. It was different, and I’ll say it, not as much fun. There is just something about being “in” the water versus “on” the water. Taxiing on the step just was not the same... If I wasn’t biased before, I definitely am now.

And then there were the big, Alaska tires. I have had the privilege of flying in other bush planes in the past, but never in the “home state.” Flying through Denali National Park with one, provided fantastic views (although not of Mount Denali itself due to weather).

At the Talkeetna Fly-In... Kevin Doyle with a 1,695-lb PA-18 Super Cub won, by far, the Certified Bush Class with a 124 ft takeoff and a 105 ft landing. Tom Hudzinski won the Experimental Bush Class with a 1,833 lb. Backcountry Cub and an 86 ft takeoff and 59 ft landing. Shawn Holly took the Certified Mid Class with a 2,132 lb. Cessna 170B and a 248 ft takeoff and a 147 ft landing. And, last but not least, the



A full crowd critiquing and paying attention to every detail during the competition.



The Cub-X specifically built to win STOL competitions.

Certified Heavy Class was championed by Chad Sutdtell and his 2,511 lb. Cessna 180. His best run showcased a 312 ft takeoff and a 251 ft landing.

***So, when are you planning your trip to Alaska?*** It may not be the birthplace of aviation, but certainly the state that has perfected it!

If you are particularly looking for STOL events, the Lower 48 also has some good STOL demonstrations/competitions as well. You may consider attending the ones at EAA AirVenture in Oshkosh, Wisconsin in July, or the 5th Annual Texas STOL Roundup in Hondo, September 28-30. Some of these events showcase obstacles in addition to traditional STOLs.

You can read the trip’s full blog (including quite a few more pictures) at [www.airtrails.weebly.com/alaska](http://www.airtrails.weebly.com/alaska). Don’t settle with just seeing Earth from the ground... It’s much prettier in 3D. Fly safe, fly often! □