

The Manager's Approach



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Columbia & Pine Mountain Lake Airports

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Airport Security

There are several different security issues that we face at our two airports. The first and foremost in the eyes of the aircraft owner is the protection of the aircraft. A common concern is the theft of avionics or at worst the entire aircraft. Fortunately, we have not experienced any of this in the last several years. The AOPA Watch program recommends that each plane should have at least two methods to lock an aircraft. The ones commonly used are the magneto key and the door lock. Some people use a prop lock, a throttle lock, a wheel lock or even lock their tiedown chains. All these are good preventative measures. If you have your airplane in a hangar, it is good practice to even keep your airplane locked while in your hangar. Remember that crime happens because of opportunity. Don't make it easy for anyone to get into your airplane.

Airport Offices Remodeled

Bad weather encourages inside work and the Airports Department has painted and remodeled both the Columbia Airport office and the Pine Mountain Lake Airport pilots lounge. New paint, removal of old fixtures and general repairs now provide a fresh look to our buildings. At our Columbia Airport offices we are looking for aviation related items for display. In particular we are looking for the loan or donation of a wooden propeller to hang on the wall. Old aircraft photos, especially of Columbia Airport would be a real treat. If you have something you would like to loan or donate to us for display in our office, please bring it by and we will see if we can find an appropriate display location.

Keeping the Runways Cleared

How about all that snow we had in the middle of March? Both Dennis and Fred were busy plowing the runways at both airports trying to keep them open. Just so everyone knows, we only have one snow plow but two airports. Only one airport can be plowed at a time. The truck and plow are kept at Columbia Airport so the plowing of Pine Mountain Lake Airport may be delayed if there is snow at Columbia Airport and the road conditions are poor between Columbia and Pine Mountain Lake.

When the snow is really deep we focus on clearing the runway and a single taxiway first followed by the ramp area. When those are done we can focus on taxilanes between hangars and other operational areas.



When the snows hit, everyone with their plane parked outside should check their aircraft. Snow can damage a plane if it gets too heavy. Wings are mostly designed for lift, so the downward weight of the snow is

similar to negative G loading. Aircraft are generally designed with a lower negative G load than positive G load. During times of heavy snows, all pilots should keep their planes free of snow.



Stupid Pilot Tricks

We have some of the best flying weather of anywhere in the world. The west side of the Sierras generally has great weather and as is commonly stated “Our airports are above the smog and fog and below the snow”. Well, we are located below the snowline most of the time! During the few days that we do have bad weather, I am amazed that there are pilots that still want to fly.

Last month I was driving up to the ramp at Pine Mountain Lake Airport and there was a pile of ice lying right in the middle of the taxiway. My first thought was that it fell off a vehicle that had just driven down from the high country so I didn’t pay much notice. But, when I got to the ramp there was an aircraft parked in the transient tiedowns with the leading edge of the wing covered with ice. I don’t know if Pine Mountain Lake was the intended final destination for this pilot or if PML is where he chose to sit out the bad weather. Either way this guy got himself into some serious icing conditions.

Excess ice on an aircraft can be very dangerous. It adds weight to the airframe and increases the stall speed of the wing. Ice is never a good thing and anyone encountering structural icing should immediately look for ice free conditions.

As you can tell from the pictures included in this issue of my Manager’s Approach, we did have some significant snow this month. I am happy to say that there were no signs that anyone landed or took off prior to us plowing the runways at Pine Mountain Lake or Columbia Airport. This shows good judgment on behalf of our pilots.

If someone had tried to take off with the wet heavy snow on the runway, it is likely that the drag on the wheels alone would have prevented the aircraft from ever achieving takeoff speed. Depending on landing gear configuration, tricycle or tail dragger, a landing on the snow covered runway could have been anything from an amazingly short landing roll to a prop strike, or at worst, having the airplane flip over on it’s back.

Another potential problem with operating an airplane in below freezing weather is the possibility of the brakes freezing. This can occur when the brakes warm up from use while taxiing and then getting covered with snow during takeoff. The snow melts on the warm brakes but then freezes as the brakes cool below freezing once airborne. This can make landings very interesting. Have you ever landed with the brakes on? I have, and I don’t recommend it.

Flying in poor weather can be hazardous to your health in many ways. Considering the few days of bad weather we encounter here in Tuolumne County, it is a good time to keep the plane tied down.

Stupid Pilot Tricks is a monthly article that attempts to raise awareness of safety and courtesy issues around our airports.

The Manager’s Approach is a monthly publication from the Tuolumne County Airports Director for the purpose of keeping our community informed of local aviation and airport issues. You can contact me at:

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