RECREATIONAL PILOTS ACADEMY

PILOT NOTES

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IN THIS ISSUE

As we head into the cooler months, the flying environment shifts. Shorter daylight, low cloud, rain, and cold dense air all change how the aircraft performs — and how you perform. Fatigue arrives earlier, preflights get rushed, and the pressure to push on through marginal weather grows when the day is already short. This issue covers what to look out for, both personally and technically, as winter sets in.

The Pilot: You're the First Thing Winter Affects

Before we talk about the aircraft, talk to yourself. Winter loads up exactly the human factors we covered in last month's issue.

Fatigue arrives earlier

Shorter days, colder mornings, and the seasonal slump mean you may be operating with less in the tank than you realise. The flight you'd fly comfortably in February deserves a second look in June. Run the IMSAFE check honestly — Illness, Medication, Stress, Alcohol, Fatigue, Eating — and remember that winter is peak season for colds and flu. Congestion plus altitude changes is a miserable (and distracting) combination.

The rushed preflight

When it's six degrees, drizzling, and the wind is cutting across the apron, the temptation is to hurry the walk-around and get into the cabin. Resist it. Winter is exactly when the preflight matters most — water in fuel, frost on surfaces, soft ground around tie-downs. Dress for the inspection, not the cockpit: a proper jacket means you'll take the time the aircraft needs.

Pressure to push on

With last light arriving mid-afternoon by mid-winter, the day compresses. A delayed start, a slow refuel, a longer-than-planned leg — suddenly you're racing the sun, and racing the sun is how pilots end up scud-running under lowering cloud. Build generous margins into your planning, set a firm “wheels down by” time well before last light, and treat any pressure to continue as a red flag, not a motivator.

> ***“A diversion or a cancelled flight is never the wrong answer.”***

The Weather: What Winter Brings to the Murraylands

Low cloud and reduced visibility

Winter mornings regularly bring low stratus and poor visibility that can linger well past mid-morning. Cloud bases that look “workable” from the ground have a habit of lowering en route. Check the area forecast and aerodrome forecasts carefully, look at the trend rather than just the snapshot, and set personal minimums before you walk out to the aircraft — then stick to them.

Fog and mist

Cold, still, clear nights along the river are a recipe for morning fog. It can form quickly, sit stubbornly, and re-form late in the day as temperatures drop. If the temperature and dew point are converging on the forecast, plan to be on the ground early — your departure aerodrome can close in behind you just as easily as your destination.

Rain and wet runways

Wet grass and soft surfaces mean longer takeoff rolls, reduced braking, and the real possibility of bogging an aircraft on taxi. Inspect the strip condition before committing, factor wet-surface performance into your numbers, and be gentle on the brakes after landing.

Last light

By late June, last light comes early — and it comes faster than it does in summer, with twilight cut short under overcast. Recreational flying is a daytime activity: plan to be on the ground with daylight to spare, not arriving as the light fades.

The Aircraft: Cold Air Changes the Numbers

Carburettor icing — winter's signature trap

Carb ice doesn't need freezing temperatures. The high-humidity, cool conditions typical of a winter day here sit squarely in the serious icing range of the carb icing probability chart, especially at reduced power on descent. Know your aircraft's carb heat procedure, use it proactively rather than reactively, and treat any unexplained drop in RPM or rough running as ice until proven otherwise.

Frost on the airframe

Even a thin layer of frost on the wings disrupts airflow and can significantly reduce lift. If there's frost on the aircraft, remove it completely before flight — all of it, not just enough to “see the shape of the wing.” Parking nose-into-sun or waiting for the morning to warm up is time well spent.

Cold, dense air — the good news and the catch

Dense winter air means better engine power, better propeller bite, and better climb performance — your aircraft will feel noticeably keener than it did in February. The catch: cold starts are harder on engines. Prime correctly, don't over-crank, and let oil temperatures come up properly before applying full power. A few extra minutes of warm-up protects the engine you rely on.

Water in the fuel

Overnight temperature swings cause condensation in part-empty tanks. Fuel drains matter more in winter than at any other time of year — take a proper sample from every drain point and actually look at it. Where practical, leaving tanks full overnight reduces the air space where moisture forms.

Batteries, tyres, and the small stuff

Cold weather saps battery performance, drops tyre pressures, and stiffens everything from door seals to throttle cables. None of these will cancel a flight on their own, but together they're a reminder that the aircraft has been sitting in winter conditions too — give it the thorough once-over it deserves.

The Winter Mindset

Winter flying in our part of the world can be superb — smooth, dense air, crisp visibility between systems, and quiet skies. The pilots who enjoy it safely are the ones who respect what's changed: shorter days, faster-deteriorating weather, an aircraft that needs a little more care, and a pilot who needs a little more honesty with themselves.

Plan conservatively. Preflight thoroughly. Decide early. And if the day isn't right — the aircraft will still be there next weekend.

WINTER QUICK CHECKS — BEFORE YOU FLY

- IMSAFE — honestly. Winter is fatigue and flu season.
- Check last light and set a firm “wheels down by” time with margin.
- Forecast trend, not just the snapshot — fog, low cloud, dew point spread.
- Full fuel drain from every point — overnight condensation is real.
- Remove all frost from the airframe. All of it.
- Strip condition — wet grass and soft ground change your numbers.
- Carb heat: know it, use it proactively, especially on descent.
- Warm the engine properly before applying full power.

Fly safe, fly prepared.