

Hangar Talk

October 2026

When weather closes in, VFR margins disappear

Recent engagement between CAA and industry has highlighted a concerning trend which was identified earlier this year in May when approximately one third of days across the southern region were affected by low cloud or fog. During this period, there were multiple reports of aircraft operating below visual flight rules (VFR) minima.

At the same time, prolonged easterly weather and high traffic levels following Warbirds Over Wānaka increased pressure to keep flying even as conditions worsened.

This is where safety margins erode and pilots could get into trouble.

What the data shows

From 1 January 2020 to 30 June 2026 there have been 43 occurrences reported to the CAA where weather has deteriorated below met minima in VFR operations. These occurrences can be categorised as:

- 33 continuing into conditions below VFR minima
- 10 where deteriorating weather was identified resulting in a turn back or diversion.

Occurrences where pilots continued into weather below VFR minima were more likely to involve inadvertent instrument meteorological conditions (IMC), emergency assistance, fuel concerns, terrain conflicts, and accidents. The data suggests that the key safety difference is often not the weather itself, but whether the pilot chooses to divert or press on as conditions deteriorate.

Safety considerations

Good decisions in poor weather are made before the flight, not in the air.

- > Obtain meteorological forecast with specific visibility and cloud base information from reliable sources for planning purposes
- > Set clear go/no-go weather minima before the flight and stick to them
- > Do not operate below VFR minima – these provide essential buffers from terrain, traffic, and weather uncertainty
- > When conditions start deteriorating, act early – delay, turn back, or divert
- > Treat external pressures (eg, time, passengers, returning from events) as risks – not reasons to continue

In marginal visibility, recovery options reduce quickly. Small deviations can lead to airspace infringements, loss of situational awareness, or serious consequences such as controlled flight into terrain.

If you're questioning and concerned about the conditions, you're already outside your safety margins.



In contrast, many reports show pilots recognising deteriorating weather and making timely decisions to turn back or divert before conditions dropped below VFR minima. These events demonstrate that weather-related risk can often be effectively managed through early decision-making and maintaining escape options.

What's happening

When weather closes in, VFR flying becomes compressed into smaller areas and lower altitudes. This concentrates traffic and reduces recovery options.

Recent observations include:

- aircraft observed operating in reduced visibility, and
- pilots continuing flights in marginal or deteriorating conditions.

As conditions improve throughout the day, traffic returns rapidly and becomes more dispersed and less predictable.

This combination increases workload, reduces situational awareness, and raises the risk of conflict.



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Why pilots continue

Two well-known behaviours are most likely at play:

1. *Plan continuation bias*: continuing the flight despite worsening conditions.
2. *Normalisation of deviance*: repeated exposure to marginal conditions reduces perceived risk.

These are reinforced by external pressures such as getting home after an event, time constraints, passenger and/or organisational expectations.

Familiarity can also play a role. Knowing the area, or having flown in similar conditions before, can reduce perceived risk – even when actual risk is increasing.

Other safety reading

- [VFR MET Good Aviation Practice \(GAP\) booklet](#)
- [VFR MET Minima card](#)
- [Vector Online: VFR into IMC, Part 1 - 3 \(Winter-Summer 2022\)](#)
- [Vector - Autumn 2026: Night Flying. Beautiful but hazardous.](#)

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