

Animals on the Strip

If you're inexperienced, trying to 'monster' stock off an airstrip through a low level, high speed beat-up is dangerously risky.

In 2014, a pilot was killed and his two passengers seriously injured, during a manoeuvre to scare cows off an Otago airstrip.

The investigation by the Transport Accident Investigation Commission found that the aircraft stalled at a level too low to enable recovery.

Experienced and well-trained agricultural pilots safely move stock from rural runways before landing, all the time.

The risk spikes if an untrained and inexperienced 'urban' PPL, attempting to land on an unfamiliar airstrip, tries a beat-up to move the animals dotted around on it.

Long-time agricultural pilot Mark Houston – now a CAA unmanned aircraft specialist – says such a landing requires planning.

"Part of that is getting the landowner's permission and asking them to remove the stock for you, if that is practical.

"If they can't guarantee the strip will be clear, it might be necessary to land elsewhere."

CAA's Principal Safety Adviser Alan Moselen says if landing is unavoidable, the correct procedure to try to remove animals is a 'balked landing' under rule 91.311.

"A balked landing is basically one where the aircraft is configured for landing and then a decision to go around is made."

CAA Aviation Safety Adviser Carlton Campbell agrees that clearing animals from an airstrip requires a pretty standard response.

"It's a mixture of two manoeuvres that should be taught to any student. Firstly, the precautionary landing technique which is a stabilised low approach and overshoot.

"The second is the go-around below 50 ft – taught so the pilot can automatically respond to some debris on a runway for instance, or if the aircraft ahead blows a tyre."

Carlton says one of the greatest risks about landing on a rural airstrip is not knowing what the animals might do.

"You need some stock sense to anticipate what is going to happen. For instance, animals will run uphill more readily than downhill, so that's a factor if there's gradient on the surrounding land.

"Or you need to know that flying down the middle of the strip just splits the stock to each side. Young separated from their mothers will try to reach them ... maybe as you are landing."

Mark agrees there's a huge amount to know about animal behaviour.

"Even if a runway is clear, but there are cows grazing nearby, by the time you turn to land, the noise of the plane may well have attracted them to the strip.

"Sheep will always run at the sound of an approaching aircraft, but cows will often just stand and watch you approach."

CAA's Principal Aviation Examiner David Harrison says if you're inexperienced, landing on a strip that may not be clear of animals really should be for emergencies only.

"That's where the threat to your life and to those of your passengers is greater than that from hitting the stock on landing.

"In all other cases, it's better to go around and land somewhere else." ■

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The taxiway at Feilding aerodrome. The runway is fenced, with a cattle stop at each end to stop wandering stock, but allowing unimpeded movement by aircraft.