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Record numbers at Black Sands



The unofficial landing judges, from left: Nooky Robinson, Max Deane, Graeme Styles and Vic McCullom.

Black Sands has been and gone for another year and, as always, marks a great effort on the part of the members of the SAA's Waikato Chapter.

This event just seems to get more popular each year and this time saw a record number of aircraft arrive for lunch on Saturday, with the unofficial tally by midday being 74 aircraft on the ground and the total for the weekend more than 100.

For the first time, aircraft were parked in a double row on both sides of the airfield. Many had chosen to fly in for Saturday only, as the forecast was not so favourable for the next day. This placed some pressure on the cooks who were preparing an excellent lunch.

The line-up was varied and colourful as it stretched along the fences. As usual, most microlight types were present, homebuilts were well represented (including chief organiser Bruce Cooke's Avian Adventurer, making its fly-in debut), GA and, to my delight, a large gaggle of taildraggers. It certainly made a spectacular sight, attracting many sightseers and locals to come for a closer look.

The event began on Friday 9 November with a busy team setting up the camp and airfield. The strip was beautifully mown, with a defined runway and threshold markings. The campground at Raglan has excellent facilities, making it a perfect place to hold this large event.

The long-range forecast had been carefully studied and promised the long awaited sunny (and calm!) weekend. This started to erode as the week drew to a close but was definitely promising for good flying. Inclement weather was less an issue for Waikato-based pilots, but others had arrived from the South Island, Far North, Hawke's Bay and everywhere in between. The Met man was saying there was rain moving up from the south for Sunday, and some pilots, not wanting to be caught out, departed for home after the beach landing on Saturday afternoon.

There is nothing nicer than opening the curtains early in the morning and discovering a perfect Piper Cub day. This was the case on the Saturday morning and we had the pleasure of flying in formation from Te Kowhai to Raglan with Bruce Coulter in his 180hp Alaskan modified Super Cub ZK-BTX and Cody Calder in Chipmunk 51.

As is common at Raglan before 10am, the windsock was lifeless and the early arrivals had nothing to complain about. I love seeing everyone hop out of their aircraft and wander along the flight line, greeting old friends and shaking hands with new ones. There is always laughter and good-natured banter.

This year the tides were in synch with us and a beach landing was planned for low tide after lunch. By this time there were a few frowns appearing on previously hopeful faces, as the sea breeze started to gain some strength, and with a 15kt crosswind from the northwest, our trip to the beach was starting to look in doubt.

Bill Henwood decided to conduct the beach landing briefing and allow individuals to make their own judgment call on whether to go or not. A large group assembled and Bruce Coulter volunteered to fly up the Gibson's Beach and report conditions, which turned out to be great with virtually no wind on the ground at the beach. It certainly was a contrast to what we were seeing at Raglan.

With a great flurry, the beachgoers launched off and made a fairly orderly line for the 5min flight up the coast north of Raglan. The rugged beauty of the west coast did not go un-noticed on approach over the headland and as everyone dotted down, one by one, onto the sand. The early arrivals were lucky enough to watch an excellent display of landings, and the number of aircraft on the beach this year equalled the record from two years ago with a total of 29.

Holding with his Gibson's tradition, Warren Butler (Jabiru ZK-CEN) scrambled over the rocks and gathered his quota of good sized mussels. With the benefit of experience (last year his plastic bag let him down badly and leaked!), his receptacle of choice this time was a bucket.

As the tide started to inch its way back up the beach, propellers started to turn and we reluctantly got airborne. The lovely smooth conditions down the coast quickly changed as we flew across the harbour entrance and downwind for runway 23. The airflow was definitely disturbed on the airfield side of Mt Karioi, creating unpredictable conditions, and the wind over the trees along the eastern end of the field generated some tricky wind shear at the threshold of 23.

Everyone landed safely, but it spoilt the flying for the rest of the day and there were many holes along the flight line as the majority departed for home.

Sunday morning arrived with calm conditions but a look that suggested it wasn't going to stay that way. As with the day before, the wind picked up and the remaining aircraft headed homewards. Everyone reported having had a great weekend and thanks must go to all the Waikato SAA team who did a great job. We look forward to next year.

- *Report and photographs by Neroli Henwood*

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