

Trip Planning

...Finding Information & Overcoming Roadblocks

First Steps

The hardest part of any journey is getting started. The hardest single part of this planned flight to Alaska is making the commitment to *Just Do It*. Really—having the dream and forming the collective resolve to make the trip is the biggest obstacle we faced.

Setting Up To Make The Trip Possible

We knew we had to have our own plane and the requisite experience. I bought a used Maule M-5 (with a Lycoming 235hp engine) four years ago. Using the Maule, I flew to Idaho and took an outstanding mountain flying course with Bob Plummer in Challis, Idaho. Since then I've been to plenty of grass strips in Colorado and dirt "runways" in the backcountry of Utah [Moab region]. Please email me if you want more information on my thoughts regarding gaining flight and mountain experience.

Regarding the plane, I have friends who have made wonderful trips to Alaska in basic Cessna 172 and Cherokee aircraft. However, I knew I wanted a tailwheel plane for the peace of mind to land on gravel, dirt, grass and, in general, somewhat unimproved runways. Hence, a year prior to the trip, we looked for the right tailwheel plane.

We thought about a Cessna 185 and also considered building a Murphy Moose. While still considering both options, I stumbled upon a recently completed Moose for sale. [Click here](#) for more facts on this plane. I'd be happy to provide more information via email.

Your Trip Philosophy

What are your goals for the flight? Here are the criteria we used to plan our route:

- Visit out of the way places we otherwise can't get to by car (more on this later)
- Insure we have enough time to stop and really see interesting locations
- Insure that we allot enough time to wait out weather without the pressure of having to be somewhere at a specific time

- Fly VFR to enjoy the scenery, and at an altitude that, while safe, insures we can pick out details below us

I've read accounts of Alaska trips by individual pilots and various pilot clubs where the goal of the trip seemed to be getting to Anchorage (or Homer, or wherever) without regard to the value of stopping at historical sites, small towns, historical landmarks or other places of possible interest between Montana and Alaska. To us, getting there is as important as being there.

Getting Information

Finding useful information about potential airstrips along the route was hard. The single best source ended up being the Alaska Airmen's Association Logbook. I highly recommend this book. While reading it, I highlighted items where the editor recommended the scenic, remote quality or *off the beaten path* aspect of a location.

I was surprised by how difficult it was to find useful information on small towns and potential stops over the Internet. Yes, one can find a tidbit here, or a tidbit there. However, there is really no single source of comprehensive information (other than the Logbook mentioned above). My "Links" page reflects the best sources of information I found in countless searches using Google, TurboScout and Yahoo! Search.

A variety of books that I've read over the years proved valuable in pointing me towards stops that I wanted to make sure we had the opportunity to visit. Several books that I highly recommend include:

- Yukon by Pierre Berton
- Flying the Alaska Wild by Mort Mason
- Coming Into The Country by John McPhee
- Alaska Bear Tales by Larry Kaniut
- Shadows on the Koyukuk by Sidney Huntington
- A History of Kachemak Bay by Janet Klein
- Travels in Alaska by John Muir
- Alaska Airmen's Association Logbook

Fuel

Another key planning consideration was being able to find fuel at various stops. In the U.S. we have the AirNav website where one can often find a recent fuel price for a particular planned stop. To my knowledge, there isn't any comparable site for Canadian airfields. Even trying to find a note about fuel availability on the AOPA website is a hit or miss proposition. After all that research, whether fuel is actually available as reported is yet another issue.

Case in point, I wanted to make a stop between Ft. Watson and Mackenzie. I stumbled upon a website chronicling one person's trip that had a picture of a fuel pump at Ft. Ware. I figured, "Ah ha...for sure there's fuel there." A few weeks later I got a phone call from the gentleman that created the website telling me that is an auto-fuel pump and that there is no 100LL available.

Ultimately, as far as fuel goes, I'm guessing for smaller planned stops based on finding a fuel reference on at least two different websites. At each stop, I hope to ask local pilots where ahead has fuel [and at what price!].

Overcoming Roadblocks

Time. How do we get enough time off from work. Fortunately, I long ago started my own business. Through a series of steps (and some missteps!) I'm in the situation where I can make the decision to sacrifice some income for the time to make this trip. My wife is a registered nurse; unfortunately she can't get enough time off, so she is meeting us in Anchorage for the Alaska portion of the trip. As for our two boys, they are a key element in the overall decision to make the trip. We want them to have the experience of seeing parts of the U.S., Canada and Alaska that are simply not seen but via a small plane. With our eldest son now a senior in High School, we know that we'll simply never get all four of us together for a 6 week period ever again—or at least it is highly, highly unlikely. If we don't take the time now, we'll never overcome the "time" excuse in the future. You have to *Make The Time Available*. No one is going to knock on your door and offer you this kind of time off. You simply have to exert your will on the situation and make it happen.

Plane. One typically wants things mechanical to *Just Work*. Well, I haven't been that lucky in the case of the Moose. This spring my engine started to make metal—a *lot* of metal. I ended up getting a new engine and, with the generous help of friends at the airport, swapped engines over the course of a few weeks.

There seemed to be no end to little things that I had to do to the plane. The annual inspection, comply with AD's, break-in the new engine, add Vortex Generators, add carpet...the list went on. Just when I thought we were ready, a week before the scheduled start of the trip my air compressor quit working [The Moose uses compressed air for its starting system]. Even with custom-made tools, this seemingly simple replacement task consumed 6+ hours.

Money. If you don't have it borrow it. Don't let money be the obstacle, for when you're in a retirement home someday the last thing you want to find yourself saying is "I wish I had...." We've budgeted about \$10,000 for the trip, including \$4,500 in fuel, \$1,000 in additional camping gear, plus a new Canon EOS D-20 camera, lodging, food, et cetera.

What I would do differently [in the planning process]

The best information I received was from a variety of folks who saw my website and emailed [or called] me with tips based on their own experiences. Hence, I'd try to complete a proposed itinerary and publish such on either a website or perhaps a plane-specific email list. For instance, there is a very active listserver for folks building / operating Murphy Moose planes.