

2003 Aerial Seabird Survey Summary

The 2003 aerial seabird surveys were scheduled for Monday, June 9 and Tuesday, June 10. Scheduling was arranged with new Chief Pilot Andy Thomas approx. 4 weeks in advance, at which time I stated that we needed to make sure there were a couple extra days left open on Classic Helicopter's schedule that week to allow for weather contingencies. Scheduling was confirmed approx. 10 days in advance with Russell Smith and Karen Walling, at which time I learned that Classic had scheduled the remainder of the week with the Park Service for a training session. I again mentioned that we needed to make sure that we had at least one extra day open that week for weather contingencies, and it was agreed that Andy Thomas would be able to fly Sunday, June 8 if necessary.

On the afternoon of Saturday, June 7, the weather forecast for Sunday looked bad with fog/drizzle conditions, so I decided not to have the pilot fly down to Oregon until Monday, which had only a slightly more favorable forecast. Unfortunately, we had few options at that point, as the remainder of Classic Helicopter's week had been booked solid. We agreed to meet the helicopter in Astoria (Warrenton airport) at about 10 am Monday.

North Coast 6/9/03

Weather at 0630 on the morning of June 9 was as had been forecast, with low clouds, fog and a little drizzle. The ceiling was <500' with approx. 2 mi. visibility. Similar conditions the day before had burned off by about noon, and the trend for Monday was forecast as improving, so we decided to drive up to Astoria, especially considering we had no other options.

Roy and I left Newport at 0700 and picked up Matt Wells on the way so Matt could drive the helicopter doors down to Newport for us. We arrived at the Warrenton airport at about 1010 hrs, and the helicopter was already on the ground waiting for us. Roy, Matt and I walked out on the ramp to meet Andy, then we loaded our gear. Andy decided to go with only 55 gals. of fuel (capacity is 75 gal) because of weight concerns. I wasn't too worried about the lack of fuel, as we could break a little earlier than usual and fly south to Tillamook when we needed to refuel. Before we took off we tested our new in-flight cell phone system designed to allow us to call out on our cell phones in flight using our helmet mic and speakers for flight following communications. I had planned to use it with my helmet, but it turned out that we had to use it with Roy's because we had only one adapter that would work with the cell phone adapter, and Roy needed it for his helmet. We found that when Roy tried to call out on his phone, we got ear-splitting feedback in the front seats, so we decided to call in to our office whenever we landed for fuel, as we had done in the past.

We powered up and departed Warrenton at 1120 hrs. Weather at departure was 100% cloudy with a hazy fog, wind WSW @ 5, 59 degrees F. The ceiling was around 1500'.

As we departed the airport we decided to fly NW up to Cape Disappointment to photograph the BRAC colony there before we headed south, because we assumed nobody from WA would be able to survey the colony for the coordinated coastwide cormorant survey. Flying up to Cape Disappointment, photographing and flying back across the river took us about 25 minutes. We then flew south to Tillamook Head, surveyed the two BAEA nests, and began photographing the rocks at Tillamook Head at 1202.

Photo conditions were good by the time we reached Tillamook Head. Light levels were fairly high, considering the overcast. Film used was Provia 400 F, pushed 1 stop. Shutter speeds at f/5.6 were about 1/1500 when we began shooting at 1202. We proceeded to survey south, and when we finished photographing the rocks at Chapman Point the pilot said that it was time for us to return for fuel. I was a little surprised because we still had about 25 gallons onboard, but I didn't question the pilot's decision. Chapman Point is closer to Warrenton than Tillamook, so we headed back north to Warrenton at 1233 to refuel. We landed at Warrenton at 1247 with about 22 gallons onboard.

After refueling at Warrenton, we departed at 1317 with 65 gallons of fuel onboard and headed south to Jockey Cap, where we resumed our photo survey at 1336. We decided to bypass Haystack Rk. at Cannon Beach because of time constraints (had planned to look for PEFA aerie there). We continued surveying south to Cape Lookout. After photographing 219-062 on the south side of Cape Lookout we headed to Tillamook at 1518 hrs to refuel. We landed at Tillamook at 1521, refueled, then departed at 1552 with about 70 gallons onboard. As we headed west from the airport we checked out the Anderson Creek BAEA nest discovered last year. It looked like there were 3 young in the nest (2 partially feathered and 1 big downy). The nest tree is near the south end of the grove west of the meander. We also checked the Reneke Point BAEA nest on the way by.

We continued south and resumed our photo survey at Haystack Rock, P.C. at 1615 hours. Checked the PEFA aerie but saw no adults and no young – occupied failure this year. We continued surveying south, finally finishing at Yaquina Head at 1725 hours. We then flew to Newport to refuel, where we landed at 1730.

I had made arrangements the night before with Sean at the Newport FBO to provide us after-hours fuel, and he met us on the ramp as we landed. I told our pilot that I wanted to refuel and continue south to Heceta Head to photograph the cormorant colonies there. He asked us how far it was and how long it would take us to shoot the colonies, and he decided he didn't have enough flight hours left to do that. He said it would take 1.2 hours to fly to Heceta Head, photograph and fly back, and that he had only 1.1 flight hours remaining. I got a very strong impression that he just didn't want to fly anymore that day. So we ended up leaving 1.1 flight hours unused on day 1, and we already knew that day 2 was going to be very long.

Right after the pilot told us that he couldn't fly down to Heceta Head that evening, he told us that "we needed to figure out where we would stop surveying tomorrow" because he said he needed to fly back to Seattle Tuesday evening in order to attend a training session

Wed. morning! I told him that we needed to survey all our colonies, but he was completely unwilling to compromise or accommodate us in any way. His conduct was really surprising. We dropped him off at the Shilo Inn and told him we'd pick him up at 0800 the next morning.

South Coast
6/10/03

Tuesday morning weather was 100% overcast with haze and fog, calm winds, 57 degrees F.

We picked up our pilot at about 0810 at the Shilo Inn and drove to the airport. After fueling, we tried to decide how we were going to be able to get all our colonies done and still allow him to deadhead back to Seattle in under 8 flight hours that day. We finally decided to have Matt drive the helicopter doors down to Bandon, where we would meet him after we'd finished up our surveys. This would allow the pilot to deadhead directly back to Seattle from Bandon with doors. Surprisingly, the pilot did not even thank us for totally accommodating his needs, let alone apologize for cutting our surveys short. Both Roy and I were appalled at his behavior.

We departed Newport at 0931 hrs. with 60 gallons of fuel onboard. We began surveying at Heceta Head at 0953, 22 minutes after we left Newport. Total survey time at Heceta Head was 18 minutes. Given these time figures, we would have had enough time to survey Heceta Head Monday evening, since we had 1.1 flight hours left that evening and a round trip to Heceta Head plus our survey turned out to be just under 1.1 hours.

After leaving Heceta Head at 1011 hrs. we continued surveying south to Gregory Point, then headed to North Bend for fuel, landing at 1115 hours. We called to make sure Matt was on his way with the helicopter doors, then departed North Bend at 1148 hrs with 70 gallons of fuel onboard. Weather: scattered clouds, with NW winds at 10 kts.

When we departed North Bend, we decided to bypass the rocks at Bandon, Blacklock Point and Cape Blanco so we could get out to the Orford Reef before any high winds kicked up. The pilot seemed particularly nervous about the winds down there, so we accommodated him yet again by modifying our survey to suit his needs. Winds at the Orford Reef were <20 kts. when we began surveying at 1218. After finishing, we continued surveying south to the Rogue Reef, then headed in to Gold Beach for fuel at 1314 hrs. We landed with 40 gal. onboard. After fueling, we departed Gold Beach at 1338 hrs. with 73 gallons onboard.

We continued surveying south from Gold Beach, and finished at Goat Island at 1413 hours. At that point we turned north and dead-headed back up to Cape Blanco to begin picking up the colonies we'd skipped earlier in the day. The NW wind had increased to about 30 kts. by that time, so we flew north at about 3500' alt. We resumed our survey at Cape Blanco at 1459 hrs, where we photographed Gull Rock and Castle Rock. Then we picked up the two rocks at Blacklock Point to the north, and continued north to Bandon.

By this time the pilot had mentioned a couple times that we were running out of time, and was really putting the pressure on us to get our surveys done, adding lots of stress to a situation that he had already made extremely stressful through his unprofessional behavior.

We again increased our altitude as we flew north to Bandon in order to decrease our headwinds. We arrived at Face Rock at 1525 hrs. and began our survey. After finishing Face Rock and Cat and Kittens, the pilot said "I have time to make two more laps," meaning two more circles around a single rock. At that time we still had 5 rocks to survey, so I just pointed to the next rock as we finished a rock and made him keep going. He tried to control down to literally the last second what we could and could not survey. We just barely got Table Rock surveyed before he broke off to rush over to the Bandon airport, where we landed at 1534 hrs. Matt was already there, waiting with his doors.

After landing we unloaded the helicopter, the pilot refueled and put on his doors, and Roy, Matt and I began driving the 2.5 hours back to Newport while the pilot flew back to Seattle. I decided on the way back that I would call the owner of Classic Helicopters the next day to voice a complaint about how we were treated.

The next day I called Karen Walling, president of Classic Helicopter Corp., and let her know what we thought of the "service" we had been provided by Andy Thomas. Karen was very apologetic on the phone and offered to send the helicopter back down without a ferry charge to finish our surveys. I thanked Karen but told her that we would still have to pay for about 4 hours of flight time to cover the 1.5 hours that we had to cut out during our surveys, so it wouldn't be economically feasible for us to do that. (It would take 4 hours to cover all areas from Clatsop Co. to Curry Co. that we had to skip during our surveys, because most of that time would be spent ferrying between sites. It would have been much cheaper to cover them when we were already there on our seabird survey.) I did tell Karen that I was going to contact OAS and request that we not pay Classic Helicopter's ferry costs from Bandon to Seattle on their return trip. I also filled her in on some of Andy's rude behavior during the flight, including how he tried to dictate when and where we would end our surveys in order to accommodate his needs, and explained to her that he really needed to work on his public relations skills. Karen asked why Andy didn't just fly back in the morning to attend the training session (we'd asked him the same thing) and I told her Andy had said that he didn't want to get up that early in the morning. Karen was quite annoyed at this.

After I spoke with Karen I called Vicki Johnston at OAS. After describing our experience with Classic Helicopters, Vicki requested that I fill out an "Evaluation Report on Contractor Performance" and submit it to her office. I did so, and included a lengthy write-up on what transpired during the flight. Vicki then contacted Classic Helicopters and had a long conversation with Karen Walling, during which she told Karen that we would not be required to pay ferry costs back to Seattle from Bandon.

When I finally received the Aircraft Use Report from Andy Thomas I saw that he had included 6.0 hours of time billed as "extended pilot availability," code EP, which had

never occurred on any of our helicopter billings before. I left a message for Vicki on Sat, June 21 asking for an explanation of the EP code before I paid the bill. Vicki called back later on Sat. and caught Roy in the office. She told Roy that the EP code did not pertain to our flight, and that I should cross it out before I sent a copy of the OAS Aircraft Use Report back to Classic Helicopters. I completed the report and mailed it out on Monday, June 23, 2003.