

November 19, 2015 - Why I HATE BIG BIRD(s)

While Florida is generally a great place to fly during the cooler fall and winter months, there is **always** the danger that comes from one of our native species... the Turkey Buzzard. When seen from the cockpit of my airplane they are often found circling in groups of a dozen or more (called a "kettle"). Generally because of their number and size--a Florida Turkey Buzzard can weigh up to 5 pounds with a wingspan of up to 5 feet--they are usually spotted and easily avoided before they become a hazard to an aircraft and its occupants. And they do their very best to try to keep out of the way on their own.



When I am flying I constantly keep my eye out for both other aircraft **and** birds. It is only prudent since birds of this type and size are capable of causing **great** damage to a small aircraft such as mine. They could easily snap off a prop, which would cause such engine imbalance as to literally rip the motor from its mounts. A wing hit could easily cause enough interruption to the symmetric air flow on one side of the aircraft making handling difficult, at best. If the windshield is hit the bird would enter through the shattered Plexiglas like a warm knife thru butter. The sharp window debris and bird parts would act just like that knife as it sliced and diced its way through anything and anyone in its path. Not a pretty thought or sight. Actually in all of the years that I have been flying, I have only twice come in contact with a bird in flight. When I was student pilot back in the late '50's, and with my flight instructor on board, we hit a small sparrow type bird on takeoff. He prudently had me return to the airport where we shut down and did an inspection of the front cowl where the strike occurred. Now this was a little trainer plane, much like what I now fly, and other than some blood and feathers on the nose of the plane, there was no other damage, so we went back into the air. My instructor said that was the first time that he had been onboard an airplane which hit a bird.



Decades ago, while on a landing roll-out at Martha's Vineyard Katama Shores Air Park, a seagull suddenly lifted into flight, right in front of me, causing a glancing blow to it from my left wing. After parking I walked back to where I thought him to be and found him still alive and "cooing" much like a pigeon. After gingerly feeling him out with the toe of my shoe, I scooped him up and brought him back to the operations shack. The manager was not happy since, as he told me, "Well, now I guess that we have to do something about him." He found a large cardboard box and gave me the keys to his Volkswagen bus and instructions on how to get to a wildlife rescue facility located on the far end of the Island. It was apparently manned by a post-graduate college veterinarian student who was volunteering for the summer. When I brought the gull there, he said that I was actually pretty lucky since this was an immature young bird who was still in shock. He told me that it had been a full sized adult it might have literally ripped my nose from my face since I had carried him in the crook of my arm. On the plus side, we did get to see a lot of the island with the loan of the free vehicle.

Well today I had my third, and hopefully very last, encounter with a bird while flying when one of those Florida Buzzards suddenly appeared directly in front of my airplane in a wings folded back deep dive, in order to escape a "sudden impact". Their natural instinct is to dive under danger and I had not noticed him in front and just above my line of sight. While the following photos have been "staged" and "photo shopped", they do represent how I felt and what I saw less than 10 feet in front of me. While traveling at 100 MPH, there would not have been enough time for me to have avoided hitting him had he not gone into his instinctive nose dive, and the result would NOT have been pleasant. I guess that we are both lucky in



that his instinctive reaction to the imminent danger was far quicker than mine. This incident occurred while on my lunch flight over to Okeechobee Airport. Upon arrival, and after deep consideration, I ordered a turkey breast sandwich. While not Turkey Buzzard meat, it was my way of getting pay-back.