

NAAG

Northern Adventure Aviation Group

Raglan Black Sands Fly-in 2015



By Rod Vaughan

Black Sands 2015 dawned bright and clear with a nice high over the North Island ensuring almost perfect flying conditions for those aviators intent on flying to Raglan. Given such weather it was, perhaps, not surprising that a record 114 aircraft flew in on the first day of the two-day event. Bruce Cooke of the Waikato Chapter of SAANZ, which has hosted the fly-in since 2004, believes it was possibly the largest ever gathering of recreational aircraft in New Zealand. Air shows, he points out, may attract more people but the aircraft count is lower.

Whatever the case, it was a most impressive turn-out of beautifully presented aircraft that ranged from Corby Starlets to C182s and almost everything else in between. Both sides of the runway at Raglan were lined with machines that had flown in from many parts of the country, some overnighting for what proved to be a very sunny and warm weekend.

Lunch proved to be a large and noisy affair with 174 people tucking in to some great food in the airfield “mess” prepared by a dedicated team of helpers,

with a further 50 packed lunches for those planning to do a beach landing. This involved flying 8nm up the coast to Gibson's Beach and landing on 800 metres of black sand, a task that was completed by 37 aircraft, yet another record for the event.

At times the circuit over the beach was busier than Ardmore and kept everyone on their toes, especially when a fickle wind forced a sudden change of landing

direction. Other traps for new players were some soft patches in the sand and barely discernible rocks that seemed to spring out of nowhere just before touch-down. But no one came to grief and a pleasant hour was spent relaxing on the beach before it was time to beat the incoming tide and head back to Raglan.

As usual Warren Butler's aircraft was laden with mussels he plucked from rocks at the northern end of the beach.



The scoring team marking the beach landings

Being the good guy that he is they were taken back to NZRA for others to enjoy.

For this writer, who had the pleasure of accompanying Cliff McChesney to Black Sands in his Pulsar KFC, it was a truly memorable experience and one not to be missed. And for those with an interest

in such things the occasion proved to be an intriguing window on the state of recreational aviation in New Zealand. What struck me first of all was the age of the pilots, who mostly appeared to be in their mid-60s, suggesting that flying for fun no longer appeals to the younger generation.

Why this should be is a bit of a mystery but could have something to do with the obsession that so many of our young people have with computer games and the virtual world. With so few youngsters learning to fly (apart from those pursuing a career in aviation) the ranks of recreational pilots could become so depleted that they will go the way of dinosaurs in ten or twenty years, and events like Black Sands will become

a thing of the past. It's a sobering thought and is an issue that needs to be addressed sooner rather than later if this wonderful pastime is to be preserved for future generations.

The other thing that struck me was the different categories of aircraft at Raglan. Around 75 per cent of them were microlights and light sport aircraft (LSA), the remainder being GA (General



Just a few of the parked aircraft at Raglan airfield

Aviation), Experimental or gyrocopters. This is very telling because it suggests that the days of GA aircraft are numbered with most recreational pilots now preferring, for a whole raft of reasons, to fly microlights or LSA's.

Of course, the term microlight or LSA is a misnomer today as many of these machines are far more sophisticated and faster than old workhorses like Cessnas and Pipers. Diehard GA pilots will take umbrage at this but the numbers speak for themselves, which is why a growing

number of aero clubs have “lighties” like Tecnams for hire.

Others may take a different view, but to me Black Sands was a salutary

reminder that recreational aviation is at a crossroads in New Zealand. Its future cannot be guaranteed unless wise heads acknowledge this and do something about it.



Raglan airfield, before the crowds roll in!

All photos: Cliff McChesney

More photos are available here: <http://wbeachdave.weebly.com/raglan-2015.html>

If you have any photos you'd like to share via the web site, please email them.
(There's a button at the top of each screen to start an email)

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