

On Approach

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FALL 2023



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IN SEARCH OF FALL COLORS RISKS AND REWARDS

By Jason Blair ATP, CFI-I, MEI-I, FAA Designated Pilot Examiner, AGI

A fall color tour is a treat that many pilots have on their yearly must-do flight list. In many areas of the country the wooded areas alight with spectacular scenery that is beautiful from the ground, and even more amazing from the air.

Whether you are taking this color tour in Maine, over the Rockies, in Northern Michigan, Wisconsin, or Minnesota, or in the higher terrain features of the Appalachian Mountains, a color tour can be one of the most memorable flights a pilot, and their chosen passengers, take every year.

The fall season will see a return to better aircraft performance with cooler temperatures, which might also make the cabin temperatures more enjoyable after summer flying. It might be a good excuse for a weekend away to visit a cider mill or for some fall hiking. And it just might be a great way to spend a Saturday afternoon as the sun goes down over the forest. Timing those flights for

peak color visibility can take a little planning, and a little luck with weather, but is rewarding when it all works out.

There are a few things a pilot might want to think about when trying to make all things line up to enhance safety considerations.

Lowering Ceilings in Rising Terrain

Frequently, chasing the best colors will find a pilot seeking out hilly or mountainous areas where colors may be changing sooner than at lower altitudes due to cooler temperatures. Consider this carefully when traveling into rising terrain. Even just a couple thousand feet of terrain climbing can change the conditions in which a pilot will be flying. Many areas see fall weather systems that generate cloud decks that hang over areas. If you are going up in terrain, it doesn't mean that the cloud deck will also be rising. This can box a pilot

in between terrain and a cloud deck when flying into rising terrain reducing the clearance between the ground elevation and the MSL cloud deck layer. Keep this in mind as you fly in search of the best colors, or, try to catch that clear day when there are no clouds. Watch the weather and pick a day that is going to not force you into flying at lower altitudes than are safe, or with which you are comfortable. If the weekend weather isn't cooperating for you, do you really have to tell anyone at work where you were that mid-weekday you called in sick? A mental health day to go flying seems pretty justifiable to me. I will leave you to make your own choices.

Higher Minimum Altitudes in Some Wilderness Areas

Some of our country's most beautiful, desolate, and best places to view fall colors also have special airspace restrictions. This is especially true

for minimum altitudes. Be sure to check the VFR sectional chart to see if any of the areas you might be visiting require you to fly with higher minimum altitudes. While it might be great to get low and see those leaves up close, in some places this is discouraged or even prohibited.

Low Altitudes over Areas with Few Emergency Landing Options

Related to that, the desire to fly low over the leaves and get a close look may put you at an altitude and in a location where an emergency leaves you with no options other than to end up in the trees. Be aware of the risks that come with flying low over terrain where few emergency options exist. Good practices might include flying higher, not introducing potential failure-inducing changes such as fuel tank switches while in these



areas (which might require some planning ahead) or flying on the edges of such areas instead of over the middle of them. A little planning can go a long way in keeping options available should a rare emergency occur.

The Return of Low Level Icing

While your color tour is probably intended to be a VFR endeavor, getting to where you will be seeing the magnificent natural displays may find you traveling IFR. With the onset of fall and cooler temperatures, we have to again start thinking of icing potential and risk at lower altitudes that we may have gotten used to in our recent summer flying endeavors. Be sure to check on freezing levels and keep an eye out for any PIREPs about icing conditions if your travel to or from your viewing area might put you in the clouds, and potentially icing conditions.

Fall color tours by aircraft remain one of my favorite things to do every year. It is truly one of the most spectacular natural displays pilots have the opportunity to take advantage of that all of those poor non-pilots don't get to experience. Too bad for them!

Jason Blair is an active single- and multi-engine instructor and an FAA Designated Pilot Examiner with over 6,000 hours total time, over 3,000 hours instruction given, and more than 3,000 hours in aircraft as a DPE. In his role as Examiner, over 2,000 pilot certificates have been issued. He has worked for and continues to work with multiple aviation associations with a focus on pilot training and testing. His experience as a pilot and instructor spans nearly 20 years and includes over 100 makes and models of aircraft flown. Jason has published works in many aviation publications, a full listing of which can be found at www.jasonblair.net.



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