

COVID CURRENCY

The BGA safety team highlights the concerns of pilot currency, particularly due to events in the past 10 months

■ Clubs can obtain printed copies of Safety Briefings from the BGA Office.

DEPENDING upon the winter weather and Covid constraints, your next flight could come a long time after your last. Pilot 'currency' is always a concern, of course, but the past 10 months or so have produced some particular problems.

Loss of currency

Psychologists have shown that our *procedural* memory, which holds our learned skills, routines and reactions, deteriorates less quickly than that which supports more deliberate thought processes. This means that, like the ability to ride a bicycle, our handling skills can survive quite long periods without use. Experienced pilots may be able to fly manoeuvres competently despite being rusty, and convince themselves and others that they are still in good form.

More complex tasks and active thought processes in flying suffer more [1]. A study for the FAA [2] found that, while mid-hours

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power pilots could perform go-arounds and crosswind take-offs quite reliably after a significant lay-off, short field landings, flight at minimum airspeed and instrument-related tasks were more seriously affected, and pilots were less able to 'stay ahead of the aircraft'. Each task takes more thought and workload, reducing our remaining capacity and affecting both our situational awareness and our ability to prioritise and make decisions. Cues – particular circumstances that prompt actions such as lowering the undercarriage – are especially eroded.

These are important factors when we return to flying after what will in some cases have been a long and disrupting lay-off.

While the number of accident reports last year thankfully remained too modest for real statistical significance, some of the accidents seemed related to loss of currency: pilots drifting downwind, losing speed control, spinning in circuit, misjudging approaches and muddling fuel selectors. In most cases, the pilots could fly, but missed cues or prioritised incorrectly. The accidents were not limited to the air: there were also rigging and ground handling accidents.

Covid complications

The Coronavirus has not only prevented us from flying, but for many it has provided disruptions that have increased the effect of the absence. The patterns of our work and domestic life have changed, sometimes radically; our workloads have in many cases increased; and many of us will have gained new worries. Sleep patterns, diet and exercise have sometimes deteriorated; and some pilots have contracted the virus itself. These all accelerate the deterioration of our pilot currency, if only because they cause our thoughts to turn less often to aviation.

At the airfield, Covid restrictions create new distractions, and we might fret about contracting or passing on the virus. Different



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procedures can break our normal cues. In the air, masks and gloves can be disturbing.

Such factors can lead to mistakes or omissions when rigging, performing the daily inspection or carrying out pre-flight checks. In flight, they can affect situational awareness, circuit planning and speed control, or cause us to miss cues to lower the undercarriage or set the flaps. They can affect our ability to prioritise, or to cope with any lack of finesse in control and coordination.

Return to flight

In a professional world, we would undergo continuation training, simulator sessions and dual practice to maintain or restore our skills before flying in command. Happily, there are gliding equivalents.

Mental rehearsal has been shown to be an effective way to restore some thought processes [3], so reading the BGA Instructor Manual [4] and Managing Flying Risk [5], thinking through a flight and working out our 'threat and error management', are all ways that we can prepare at home. Desktop PC simulators – popular for online 'ladder' competitions last year – are another; and if your club has a more realistic simulator, that's better still.

Flight with an instructor is the usual way of restoring your skills after a break, but not every club has the capacity after lockdown and pilots with medical vulnerabilities might not wish to share a cockpit. If you're obliged to fly solo, it's particularly important that you make the conditions as favourable as possible:

- Pick a gentle day, and a familiar aircraft and launch site



Keeping safe: Wrekin's Catherine Cairns with instructor Nigel Readman

- Don't plan anything ambitious
- Think through the flight and eventualities beforehand
- Take your time and don't allow yourself to be rushed; and
- Fly conservatively with ample margins for error.

The Currency Barometer [8] is a great way to get a rough check of your currency, but expect to be rusty, and for the rust to be uneven: don't drop your guard if you seem to have forgotten less than you thought.

Tim Freegarde and the BGA safety team

PREVIOUS 'FLY RIGHT' ARTICLES

The Perils of Distraction (Apr/May 19)
Keeping Safe in Thermals (June/July 19)
Why It Is Good to Think Ahead (Aug/Sep 19)
The Effects of Wind Gradient (Oct/Nov 19)
A Fun but Safe Introduction (Dec19/Jan20)
Stop the Drop (Feb/Mar 20)
Avoiding Upset (Apr/May 20)
Backroom Boys (June/July 20)
Cockpit muddle (Aug/Sep 20)
Safe rotation (Oct/Nov 20)
Cockpit remedies (Dec 20/Jan 21)

HANDLING SKILLS CAN SURVIVE QUITE LONG PERIODS WITHOUT USE

■ For more advice about returning to the air, see the BGA's Covid-19 website [6] and GASCo's *Return to flight* [7].

- [1] W Arthur Jr et al., *Human Performance* 11, 57 (1998) <https://tinyurl.com/flyright2101>
- [2] J M Childs et al., FAA report DOT/FAA/CT 83/34 (1983) <https://tinyurl.com/flyright2102>
- [3] J M Childs & W D Spears, *Perceptual and Motor Skills* 62, 235 (1986) <https://tinyurl.com/flyright2103>
- [4] BGA Instructor Manual <https://tinyurl.com/flyright2104>
- [5] BGA Managing Flying Risk <https://tinyurl.com/flyright2105>
- [6] BGA Covid-19 – restrictions, support and restarting gliding information <https://tinyurl.com/flyright2106>
- [7] GASCo *Return to flight* <https://tinyurl.com/flyright2107>
- [8] BGA Currency Barometer <https://tinyurl.com/flyright2108>



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