

Negrito 2014

By Will Fox

We are on approach to the Negrito airstrip, and Cathy Myers, who is President of the New Mexico Pilots Association, is playing approach control, and has just advised us that the strip is extremely muddy with standing water in some places. She tells us that it is best if we touch down on the north end of runway 17, where the gravel is, and get slowed down before we hit the mud and water. More than one aircraft has already managed to land a bit long and hit the mud and water a bit too fast only to go fishtailing down the strip like a New Mexico brown fighting for its life. Runway 17 at Negrito is a pretty long strip by backcountry standards, but it is only about as wide as a forest service fire road built on a budget. You don't want to get off into the deep clump grass on the side, because it is full of rocks, and I mean gear busting size rocks. I figure putting the Peg down as slow as I can at the beginning of the gravel is the best bet and then I'll let the 26" Alaskan Bushwheels do the rest.

My daughter, April, and I, along with Thomas Spickermann and Skip Egdorf, had been planning the trip to the 2014 Negrito Back Country Flyin for several weeks. April likes flying taildraggers and is a banner tow pilot in her spare time. The idea of flying the Peg into a backcountry strip and camping for the weekend was something she and I were both looking forward to. My wife Barb was also planning to go, but relinquished her seat in the Peg, so April could help me with the flying, and was driving down instead and bringing April's dog, Lola, along for company.



Figure 1. April and I hamming it up on the way to Negrito. Hey, who is flying the airplane?

Thomas is our chapter president and was planning to take his newly finished Zenair 750 on its first trip to a backcountry strip. Skip, already an accomplished backcountry flyer, was planning to take his trusty Taylorcraft. Skip and Thomas left early on Friday morning. April and I got off to a late start because April had to work that morning, but other than weaving our way around a couple of afternoon thunderstorms, the trip was very enjoyable.

The New Mexico terrain is very interesting in the southwest part of the state with rugged mountains interspersed with flat plains. In one of those plains, you will find the Very Large Array (VLA). The VLA is a radio astronomy observatory located on the Plains of San Agustin, between the towns of Magdalena and Datil, some 50 miles west of Socorro, New Mexico. It has been featured in numerous movies like *Contact*, *Terminator Salvation*, and *Independence Day*, because of its futuristic look. The dish antennas look pretty small from the air, but when you get up close you find they are over 80 feet in diameter and quite impressive.



Figure 2. The Very Large Array (VLA) on the plains of San Agustin.

As we left the VLA behind, we noticed an unusual pattern on the ground. It resembled a spoked wheel about a mile in diameter. After considerable speculation as to the origin of the pattern, including the New Mexico version of a crop circle, we concluded it was instead a series of cow trails. The axle of the wheel was a water tank, and the terrain was so flat around it that the cows just made a beeline for it from any point in the pasture.

It was a pretty day and the air was calm. However as the afternoon progressed, monsoon-driven thunderstorms began to form, and a couple began popping up to the west

and south of us. It looked like Negrito was still clear, but we weren't sure for how long, so we made a beeline for it just like the cows to the water tank.



Figure 3. Alien signs or cow trails?



Figure 4. A beautiful day for flying in New Mexico with gorgeous scenery.

As we approached Negrito, it was still sunny and the winds were light and variable. We could see that several aircraft were parked next to the strip, and the summer grass in the meadow was tall and green. Thomas and Skip were already there and parked next to the group camping area. We called on the CTAF and Cathy's pleasant voice came on as she brought us up to date on the conditions.

April let me do the landing, and it was actually quite uneventful, thanks to the Peg's titanium gear and those big fat tires. We touched down on the gravel about where Cathy had suggested, and, with the Peg's low landing speed, slowed down well before the serious mud and water. Those tundra tires just floated on top of everything, mud, rocks, water, and, except for the tailwheel, we arrived at our parking area next to the general camping area with hardly any mud on the plane. The same couldn't be said for Thomas and Skip. They had landed earlier in the day and it had been a tad bit muddier then. Their airplanes has that serious bush plane look, decorated with bugs and mud in a backcountry motif.



Figure 5. Thomas got a bit muddy trying to clean his airplane after the landing at Negrito.

April and I were setting up camp when Barb and Lola arrived in the pickup. It had been an exciting drive, particularly when Barb got on the forest service roads that had seen some heavy rain. She had gone through a couple of mud holes that had challenged our 4x4 Chevy pickup but had managed not to get stuck. That was about to change though, as she tried to make her way over to camp and slid into a serious bog. I had a

flight instructor that once told me, that having an instrument rating was just like owning a four wheel drive vehicle. It can get you through some nasty weather, but when you get stuck, you are really stuck. Well, the pickup was really stuck. Thankfully, Ron Keller came over with his 4x4 Ford pickup to help pull me out. Ron said he had already pulled two airplanes out of the mud as well as another vehicle and was planning on adding another notch to his running boards. Unfortunately this was not to be the case, as no good deed goes unpunished, and the bog quickly swallowed Ron's truck as well. It was beginning to look like a Stuck-o-rama when Larry Filener drove over along side the runway in his 4x4 and started slip-sliding around as well. Uh-oh, this could be bad. Never fear though, with lots of help from plenty of folks, we finally got both vehicles out of the bog, and all three safely back to the parking area. We only sorta got stuck one more time in the process.

As we finished making camp, the weather started to build back towards us from the south. It looked like more rain and, sure enough, before long the pitter-patter of raindrops chased us into our tents. Luckily it was a short rain, and we were back out enjoying the companionship of our fellow aviators as Ron's freshly made, custom brats, packed with green chili, began to sizzle on the grill.



Figure 6. Uh-oh, more rain headed this way.

Once again Ron and Larry out did themselves cooking for the hungry bunch of intrepid adventurers. In fact it was an adventure just grilling those brats. The green chili smoke coming off the brats was bringing tears to our cook's eyes. I'll tell you though, wrap one of those babies up in a tortilla with some mustard and catsup, pile a few beans around it, gather up a beer, and cozy up to the camp fire with your friends and neighbors, and I can't think of a better place to be.



Figure 7. Dinner is on and Mother Nature is treating us to a rainbow.

It is always fun to sit around the campfire and just shoot the bull after a nice dinner, and that is just what we did, as the clouds slowly disappeared and the stars started to come out.



Figure 8. Why is it that dogs always hang around the little kids during dinner?

The young at heart started roasting marshmallows and the rest of us settled down to enjoy the evening as the stars began filling the sky. You can't look at that night sky and not think about the origin of things. Thomas is a physicist so I asked him what he knew about the God particle (Higgs Boson). Boy, did I give him a listening to. Before he was done, he had talked about dark matter, dark energy, leptons, gluons, and some other stuff I had never heard of. Did you know that some physicists now believe that all matter has a half-life, it is just so long that we haven't been able to measure its decay yet. Whew, this stuff was beginning to make my head explode. I changed the subject before that could happen and pointed out a satellite tearing across the night sky, and that got Skip to pointing out various stars and constellations. Skip really knows his stargazing. As I listened to him and Thomas talk about stars, and stared at that sky, all I could think was what a beautiful place we live in and how lucky we are to be here. Before long it was getting late, and it was anyone's guess as to what tomorrow would bring; with the forecast for more moisture, we might be leaving early, so we all decided to call it a night and hit the sack.

The next morning it was a little chilly, and Negrito was sitting in the top of a cloud when I woke up. The sun was trying its best to shine through, but the cloud wasn't making it easy. It made for a few pretty pictures. It wasn't long though before the sound of airplane engines began to fill the air. First up was Chris Wilson in his Interstate, off to explore the early morning air. Soon, more adventurous souls began to arrive over Negrito to join the fun and grab a big ranch style breakfast.



Figure 9. Negrito is in the clouds.

I walked down to the end of the runway with the dog, enjoying the incredibly fresh air, watching the shifting clouds, and soaking my pants to the knee in the tall grass and fresh morning dew. As I looked for the first aircraft, I saw it appear out of the drifting mist like a specter from a Negrito past. The pilot made a beautiful approach and put the aircraft down as smooth as could be in the still morning air, but you could tell when he hit the mud, and the tail tried to come around on him. I followed the next aircraft around the pattern mostly by sound, helped by an occasional glimpse of it as it slid across a gap in the mist, and then watched it materialize on final. Again, the pilot made a smooth landing only to have it get a little exciting as the aircraft began a slide sideways in the mud, but he quickly got it straight again.



Figure 9. The clouds burned off over Negrito revealing a beautiful day.

I was amazed at how well each pilot was handling the challenging runway conditions. They were touching down and tracking straight as arrows, until they hit the serious mud and then things would get a little dicey. I don't know how some of those pilots were staying on the runway. But stay on the runway they did in spite of the conditions.

Breakfast was on when I got back, and as I stepped up to the plate, I noticed that Cathy, who was taking her turn as cook and server, was crying. It's the green chili from the brats, she quipped as she heaped eggs, sausages, brats, and pancakes on my plate.

Looking at that breakfast, I figured I might need to redo my weight and balance calculations before I took off. Sitting down to eat I overheard another pilot, who had arrived that morning with a fresh weather report, talking about the probability for rain increasing as monsoon moisture pushed further into the state. It looked like things might be getting a bit wetter and muddier over the next day or so. After breakfast, the Los Alamos folks discussed the weather and decided that discretion was the better part of valor, and that leaving today was probably our best option, unless we wanted to spend several more days at Negrito waiting out the weather. This wouldn't have been a problem for Skip, since he had brought enough supplies to last for a month in the bush, but the rest of us might get a bit hungry. I still don't know how Skip managed to cram all stuff into his Taylorcraft.



Figure 10. The morning dew was beautiful, even if it did soak your pants leg up to the knee in the high grass.

Skip and Thomas loaded up and departed first, as April and I helped Barb pack the pickup for the trip home. I decided to put chains on the truck, since I was sure the roads would be muddier on the way out with the recent rains and I didn't want Barb to get stuck in the wilderness with only the dog for help. By the time April and I were leaving, it was starting to sprinkle on the Peg windshield, and a few claps of thunder further motivated our swift departure. I'm always amazed at the additional takeoff roll the Pegazair needs at Negrito. I really get spoiled with those 400 foot takeoffs in Los Alamos. It probably didn't help that we had a quartering tailwind, the field was muddy,

and we were carrying some extra fuel along with all our gear. The tail came up fairly quickly, but when I pulled to lift off, it just went back down, hit the ground and aviation didn't happen. I decided to hold the tail low attitude and let the plane accelerate a little longer as I corrected a bit more for the growing crosswind. After a few more seconds, the Peg lifted off with a tentative shrug rather than its normal enthusiastic levitation. I'll try to remember to be more patient next time I takeoff from Negrito. As we departed the field, we watched the thunderstorm to the west ease towards Negrito, and were glad we left when we did.

The flight home was great because I was getting a chance to fly with April again, and the fact that we had a 10 knot tailwind and there were no thunderstorms in our path only made it better. We soon caught up with Skip and Thomas who were keeping each other company on the trip back. Thomas figured he needed to stop for fuel at KAEG, but Skip thought he could make it home with the tailwind. When I reached Los Alamos the winds were 170@16G24. This was a bit over my personal minimums of 15 knots for the Peg when the winds were from the south in Los Alamos, so April and I began to think about a diversion to KSAF. But as we got closer the wind began to drop, so we decided to make an approach and see what it looked like. Turned out that it was fine, and I managed to keep the airplane on the runway and it was usable again, so it was a great landing. Skip landed 30 minutes later and as he rolled out, April commented that he was "tracking true" down the runway in the crosswind, high praise from a banner tow pilot. Skip later told us, that even with the mud and water and soft field landing and takeoff at Negrito, his proudest achievement was the crosswind landing in Los Alamos. We all agreed that Thomas has done a great job on his landings and takeoffs, especially given the conditions at Negrito and that the 750 had been properly christened for backcountry flying. Barb showed up later that evening and said the chains made her feel invincible, and that there wasn't a mud hole she couldn't handle on the trip home. I think we created a monster.

We all agreed that we had so much fun at Negrito that we are going to plan a Chapter event to fly down there next year, so that more pilots can enjoy the combination of adventure, wilderness experience, and challenge that backcountry flying affords us lucky souls here in New Mexico. It should be great fun. Well, that is the Negrito Report for this year; I hope you enjoyed it and will join us next year.