



HOW AND WHY TO FLY A SKYWAGON



by Andrew Dilworth
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As the chief instructor for one of the rarest of aviation courses — one that teaches how to fly the specific model of Cessna called the 180 Skywagon — Andrew Dilworth of SkyHoppers Aerial Adventures (phone 800-515-4225) knows the Skywagon about as well as anyone.

From SkyHoppers' website at www.flyskyhoppers.com, here's a description of the course:

SkyHoppers offers a unique course of Cessna 180 high-performance-tailwheel training not found anywhere else in the lower 48 United States. Our transition-training includes instruction in high-performance power-plant operation, tailwheel airplane inspection & handling, and basic tailwheel maneuvers including taxi, takeoffs, and 3-point landings. As you progress, we will review and practice advanced crosswind techniques, and introduce you to two- and one-point wheel landings on both pavement and grass strips. After you demonstrate proficiency in tailwheel flying, we can then introduce you to the short-field capabilities of the Cessna 180 and the related techniques.

We asked Andrew to give us a rundown of why to fly this interesting model of airplane, and what to look for in a used Skywagon.

What are your favorite, unique elements of this airplane, and what is the reason you use it so extensively?

The Skywagon is the quintessential American bush plane. Its design is timeless and form factor ever so practical, from the huge baggage area to the quick-removal rear seats. Like the 4x4 Jeep industry, there are also seemingly countless modifications that can be made to the plane. It is also an extremely stable platform for all kinds of flying and very forgiving at the hands of new Skywagon pilots, given proper instruction and experience building. It is the rugged alternative to the milder-mannered Cessnas, for a younger generation of pilots seeking the adventure experience. As for me personally, I really like the aspect of climbing *up* into the plane, especially when it is equipped with oversized tires. Being a Skywagon driver also allows one to command a bit of swagger.

What is the most surprising or most difficult aspect to learn for a “new” Skywagon pilot (even one who has flown extensively before)?

As a professional Skywagon trainer, I have trained more than 100 pilots in the Skywagon, both 180 and

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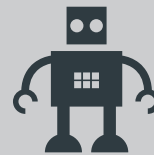
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185, and have found that the most difficult aspect for the trainees is refinement of their basic crosswind landing skills to accommodate the momentum of the plane when unwanted yaw develops. In a nutshell, the aileron *must* remain into the wind, steer with the rudder, and manage the energy with precise power inputs. The airline-pilot Skywagon trainees sometimes have difficulty with the rudder steering, as I have had many of them tell me they aren't even allowed to touch the rudder in flight.

The 'one-point' wheel landings are of course the most difficult, especially when reaching the demonstrated XW component (or beyond) — I liken the experience and required inputs to performing ballet with the airplane. Other somewhat difficult aspects when first learning to land the Skywagon include mastering the roll-on to wheel landings and the sensation of 'pinning' the airplane in that attitude (and the amount of force it takes), as well as mastering the flare in a three-point attitude, in which the runway cannot be seen over the cowl.

The most surprising aspect for Skywagon trainees is how easy the plane can be to land when executed properly, following proper procedure, using techniques specific to the Skywagon and timely control inputs. Equally surprising is when light-tailwheel pilots (Citabria, etc.) try to land it like a Citabria — such [attempted] landings are often ugly when they first are learning how much momentum the Skywagon carries and how much effort, skill, and timely inputs it takes to correct for unusual attitudes during landing. As the saying goes, "If you are a heathen, the Skywagon will turn you into a believer, and if you are a believer, the Skywagon will turn you into a heathen."

What is your advice for somebody looking to buy a Skywagon? What are the first few things you would inspect?

Cost considerations aside, first the future Skywagon driver needs to determine how they want to use their Skywagon. If they want to go faster and land as short as possible, then the earlier model years, with their substantially lighter weight combined with upgraded engines, fit the bill. If they want to carry more weight and go longer distances, and brave serious IFR conditions, then the later models (particularly the late '70s and early '80s models) with their longer-range tanks, greater useful loads, and modern six-pack instrument clusters should be considered.

Then, having selected a Skywagon year and shopped around for a few to choose from, the future Skywagon driver should first inspect for previous damage history (which most Skywagons have), and the quality of the repairs. Obvious areas to look for are smoking rivets and/or wrinkled skin in the gearbox area, damage to the tail section (especially the skins), and of course the condition of the horizontal stabilizer jackscrews, and the hinge bushings and the infamous hockey-stick angle

brackets they bolt to. Next would be to assess the completeness of the plane's documentation (logbooks, 337s, etc.). Many planes have had modifications (and repairs) made without accompanying 337 forms, whether or not an STC was available for such modifications, and/or whether the STC was purchased for the plane. All this is aside from the usual inspections for corrosion, engine oil analysis, cylinder compressions, etc. As with all planes, it is best to buy a Skywagon with as few hours as possible, and which has been flown and maintained with some regularity since it was new.

Add anything else you think is interesting about this plane, its maintenance, or its pilots.

There is so much to say about all three of these aspects that I don't know where to begin, and perhaps a whole article could be written about them. The "flying tail" aspect of the plane (jack-screw-equipped horizontal stabilizer), "square" tail, and the "fastback" design are some of the more interesting elements. The various combinations of modifications to be found on any given plane allow for hours of conversation between fellow Skywagon drivers.

As for maintenance, the jack screw assemblies can be particularly onerous to maintain, especially if the plane doesn't have the access cover installed in the lower tail cone. Tire rotation is important to prevent highly uneven wear on the outside of the tire tread, especially when performing lots of wheel landings, which I do in my training program. I recommend all Skywagon owners invest in newly available hydraulic lift jacks to make this a simpler, safer process.

As for Skywagon drivers, they are quite the cohort. Without going into the various Skywagon personality traits I have encountered over the years, I can say that it takes a certain amount of moxie to become a Skywagon pilot. Those who go on to become Skywagon drivers are self-starters, independent-minded, thrive on the challenge of the Skywagon, and pursue Skywagon ownership as a way of life, incorporating the plane into their family activities and going farther with these planes than most other single engine Cessna owners. That said, it is Skyhoppers' mission to transform ordinary pilots into the persona of Skywagon drivers with the accompanying skills, in order to equip the Skywagon fleet with professionally trained Skywagon owners for generations to come.

