

CALLBACK

From NASA's Aviation Safety Reporting System



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NON-TOWERED AIRPORT HAZARDS

Non-towered airport operations can expose pilots to some peculiar hazards that may not typically be seen at towered airports. While FAA regulations and standard operating procedures exist that govern and maintain safe, non-towered operations, pilots must ensure strict procedural compliance and employ sound judgment to achieve that goal. Simple oversights or cutting corners in a non-towered environment may degrade flight safety more than the same infractions under the watchful eye of a Tower Controller. Accordingly, pilots must be extra vigilant when communicating and conducting operations at non-towered facilities.

This month, *CALLBACK* shares reported incidents that occurred during or associated with non-towered operations. Examine inherent risks and hazards, and ponder whether and how you could have mitigated each to enhance flight safety.

Part 91 – Takeoffs and Landings

This DC3 First Officer described a developing critical ground conflict and the action needed to mitigate the threat.

■ While operating out of ZZZ airport, we announced our intentions to take off via runway XX (a downhill runway), as is standard operating procedure for our crew, due to the size of the DC3 and downhill slope away from the airport. Normal traffic pattern arrivals call for the use of runway XY. While ZZZ is a non-towered airport, there is a facility and airport manager who will sometimes provide additional services for arriving and departing aircraft, such as advisory calls, weather updates, and parking information. As we took the runway after our CTAF call, the airport manager notified us that there was an aircraft on final who failed to make a CTAF call. Our aircraft had just lined up on runway XX, and the offending aircraft was...at approximately 500 feet on final approach. Due to the opposite direction taxi and checklist duties, our crew could not see the other aircraft until we were aligned on the runway. We made 3 attempts to contact the aircraft on final and tell them to go around. UNICOM did the same. The aircraft continued its approach, and at approximately 300 feet when it became apparent that the aircraft was not initiating a go-around, the Captain executed an evasive taxi into the gravel and cleared onto the taxiway to avoid the landing traffic. The 172 continued its approach, landed, and taxied clear. UNICOM then let us

know that the runway was clear, and we again announced our intention to depart runway XX. With no other traffic, we departed without incident. Upon recovery, the airport manager notified us that the offending 172 was a student pilot with an instructor and they were on the incorrect frequency. Apparently, they never noticed the DC3 on the opposite end of the runway and, because of the lack of radio communications, continued their approach.

Part 121 – Obstacle Departure Procedures

A medium-large transport First Officer described curiosity and caution over terrain clearance during departure while ATC inspired respect for obstacle departure procedures.

■ ZZZ is uncontrolled.... Holding short of the runway, we called ZZZ Center and received our clearance to ZZZ1...as filed. We had planned for the ZZZ obstacle departure, which reads to turn right direct to ZZZ VOR, then from ZZZ climb in holding until passing MEA/MCA. We were familiar with the terrain, had briefed the grid MORAs, had terrain radar on Navigation Display (ND), and had the enroute chart open. Weather was night VFR. After takeoff, approaching the ZZZ VOR, we were identified by and in contact with ATC. We were climbing at a rate that [made it] clear that terrain separation wouldn't be an issue. We were approaching the MSA and...decided we did not need to enter the hold, but rather to turn enroute as filed. We were of the mindset that once in contact and identified...ATC would take over both terrain and route clearance/planning.... No further instructions were given. Out of curiosity, we queried ATC if they needed a specific altitude to continue on our route, or if they had a minimum vectoring altitude [that] they needed us to climb above. They reminded us that terrain separation was our responsibility at that time, but that if we had any doubt, they recommended a heading of 170 degrees. While terrain separation was never in any doubt...to ensure we were all on the same page, we elected to turn...to the suggested heading, and passing XY,000 we were cleared direct to ZZZ1 VOR and continued our flight as planned. In hindsight, we should have entered the hold at ZZZ [VOR] and completed the obstacle departure routing, including a climb to at least XX,200 ft. (MORA) and requested direct

routing, or to XZ,000 ft. (airway MEA) and continued as filed.... The radar altimeter never activated, and the terrain radar display gave us no cause for concern. The enroute chart was displayed, and MORAs were extensively briefed (since it was night and uncontrolled). However, in essence, we deviated from the obstacle departure procedure, and thus also deviated from the Operations Manual procedure....

Part 135 – Controlled Flight Toward Terrain

An Embraer First Officer recounted how a warning system and instrumentation alerted this crew to the threat.

■ On arrival into ZZZ during the descent, setting up to enter the left downwind for [Runway] XX, we had the airplane descend down to 9,000 ft. for terrain to ensure 1,000 ft. clearance. Visual contact was maintained, as the moon was full at night to provide adequate visual separation. As the Captain (pilot flying) began to turn southeast to enter downwind, he requested 8,600 ft. for traffic pattern altitude. As the turn commenced, the RA began to show altitude and indicated a 1,300 ft./min. descent. Due to the rate of descent close to terrain, the gear warning sirens went off. The Captain then took controls off autopilot and increased thrust to level off. The warning cleared in no more than 3 seconds. We continued to land with no issues. Cause: Descent rate close to terrain in sight. Suggestions: Possibly...slow rate of descent or stay higher from terrain or maneuver to the side.

Part 121 – Runway Conditions

This CRJ900 First Officer got a small self-induced surprise shortly after breaking out during a real weather approach.

■ As we were approaching ZZZ, I as the pilot monitoring, tuned to the CTAF frequency for the airport....The Tower was closed. I mistakenly tuned to the wrong frequency and failed to double check...the approach chart.... We got cleared for the ILS Runway XXL approach. We were then told by Approach Control to switch to advisory frequency since the Tower was no longer in operation. In our approach brief, we mentioned the anticipated threat of Tower being closed. The [AWOS] weather had mentioned that there was snow removal in progress at the airport, but we assumed...as it was past midnight, this may not have been accurate at our current arrival time.... Established on the approach, we... fully configured prior to the FAF. We were currently in IMC and making position reports. We did not hear any replies or anyone else on the frequency, but did not find this odd since it was past midnight local time. At the time there was some task saturation with conducting the approach in icing conditions at night and not having flown the CRJ900 frequently. As we

were making position reports on the ILS, we eventually broke out from the IMC a couple hundred feet above our DA. We then saw snow plows and snow brush trucks on the runway.... Seeing this, we immediately conducted a go-around for the missed approach. After performing the missed approach and after running the appropriate checklists, we contacted approach to inform them we went missed due to snow plows on the runway. They asked if we had heard anything from the snow plows as we made our calls, and I replied that we had not, still under the assumption that we had the correct frequency. I did not know how to get in touch with the plows if they had not responded to CTAF, so I went to my Electronic Flight Bag (EFB) to find the Ops frequency. It was at this point that I finally double checked the frequency and realized my error. We corrected the issue with putting the correct frequency in COM 1 on the second approach attempt and gave the snow plows and trucks plenty of time to get off the runway so that we could land. The flight then landed safely in ZZZ without incident.... I needed to double check the frequency that I input, especially seeing that, more than likely, there was not going to be any traffic in the area.... It would be unlikely that we would hear anyone else on the CTAF frequency, thus having to double check that we tuned the correct frequency.

Part 91 – Decisions and Consequences

A C172 Flight Instructor described approach decisions and the sequence of events that led to this unwanted outcome.

■ I was on the downwind for [Runway] XX when a corporate jet was inbound to XY, the opposite runway. They were 8 miles out. I offered to do a 360 for spacing to allow them to go first, and they said no, go ahead. Communication was fine, but then they were [on a] 3-mile final as I got over the runway. In an attempt to get off the runway quickly, I sped up, bounced the aircraft a few times, and the taxiway I was trying to get to (taxiway 1) went past me as I had too much speed. I then tried for taxiway 2, and I also had too much speed to slow down and make the turn to get off. At this point, the...jet decided to enter the downwind for XX, but it was too late for me... I wasn't able to stop in time for taxiway 2. I went in between two taxiway lights into the dirt and popped back onto the runway.... No damage...occurred. I then taxied all the way to [taxiway] 3.

The reports featured in CALLBACK are offered in the spirit of stimulating thought and discussion. While NASA ASRS does not verify or validate reports, we encourage you, our readers, to explore them and draw your own conclusions.

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ASRS Alerts Issued in July 2025	
Subject of Alert	No. of Alerts
Aircraft or Aircraft Equipment	4
Airport Facility or Procedure	12
ATC Equipment or Procedure	11
Other	3
TOTAL	30

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July 2025 Report Intake	
Air Carrier/Air Taxi Pilots	5,975
Flight Attendants	2,084
General Aviation Pilots	1,851
Military/Other	715
Dispatchers	431
Controllers	417
Mechanics	233
TOTAL	11,706