2012 SAFETY PROGRAM

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The New Silly Season

In much of the country winter means a halt to soaring. Come November, the days are getting shorter and colder. Cold weather and stable air masses combine to make soaring something most glider pilots think about rather than do. Some areas that do fly all year tend to see poorer soaring conditions and fewer and/or shorter flights. The SSF takes advantage of these winter months and goes on the road presenting Flight Instructor Refresher Clinics, Safety Seminars and Site Surveys.

Conventional wisdom says that soaring returns to the U.S. in April. Clubs sponsor safety seminars, members gear up for spring checkouts, and as the days get longer significant others get used to their partner spending weekends at the field.

Some also call this the Silly Season, as pilots who haven't flown for 5 or 6 months show up and make dumb mistakes trying to knock the rust off their skills. The number of accidents goes up as pilots return to the air.

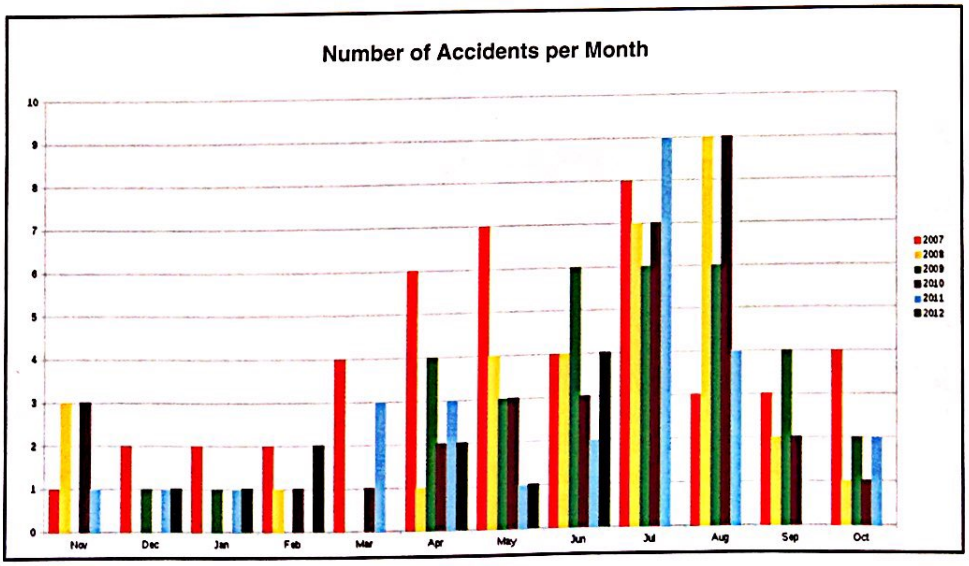
But is conventional wisdom correct? A review of accidents reported to the NTSB seems to indicate that the Silly Season comes much later in the year! (And, a confidential review of data in the SSA Insurance Program shows a similar trend.)

Last year at this time, the SSF was dealing with a July surge in accidents and insurance claims. This surge was so exceptional that we sent a letter to every SSA member noting that we had an insurance claim every day in July 2011. As this article is being written we don't have July 2012 figures; let's hope that we won't have repeated the 2011 record.

However, was July 2011 really an anomaly or part of an on-going trend? The accompanying figure shows the number of accidents reported each month from November 2006 through June 2012. This graph was originally made in August 2011, and it has been updated just before being sent to the *Soaring* editor in early July for this report in your September *Soaring*. As the graph clearly shows, the peak number of accidents occurs during the months of July and August.

What lessons can we draw from this graph?

First off, it appears that pilots are showing up later in the year. Could it be that as we have gotten older, we put off going out when the temp is still in the 50s or 60s (April or May) and wait until it warms up a little more? Maybe we are still dealing with kids, work, school, family, and other activities in the spring and it isn't until later in the summer that we get a chance to head out to the field? Whatever the reason, we see a spike in the number of accidents.



What can we collectively do about this? The first thing is we all need to recognize that a lay-off from flying means that our skills, both decision making and mechanical pilot skills, have deteriorated during the down time. Coming back in April or August doesn't matter, we could all benefit from a quick refresher flight with an instructor who is current.

If your club or FBO requires spring checkouts, how do you catch the pilot who doesn't show up until July? Do such pilots slip through the cracks because the system is set to catch folks only in April or May? A review of your club/FBO procedures can help you spot, and fix, this issue and ensure that all returning pilots are offered the opportunity to knock the rust off their skills before solo takeoff for the first time that year. If your club/FBO doesn't have any system for determining a pilot's status, then you need to adopt one.

The bottom line is, this figure demonstrates that the conventional wisdom is wrong, the peak of the Silly Season is much later! Take a moment and consider what your level of proficiency is as you step out of the car on your first day out at the club/FBO. Ask yourself, How can I avoid being an accident statistic? Luck or Skill, you decide!