

# See and Avoid – Paragliding in the Same Airspace

Increasingly congested airspace above New Zealand has led to some nasty frights for both paragliding, and powered, pilots.

Late last year, paragliding instructor Mark Hardman was at the Treble Cone launching site, when he watched in horror as a recently launched pilot found herself in the path of a rapidly descending helicopter.

"She'd launched only moments before a helicopter appeared over the ridge coming out of the skifield basin, at speed, and directly over the launch site.

"There would have been no more than 100 metres horizontal, and about 70 metres vertical, separation between them as the helicopter passed."

This potentially disastrous encounter is among a recent number of similar occurrences, mainly in the Wanaka area, and on the west coast of Auckland.

"It would appear that some recreational paragliding pilots have got into the wrong airspace, including controlled airspace," says CAA's team leader of recreational aviation, Jeanette Lusty.

"And equally, some powered aircraft have strayed into known (and marked on the charts) paragliding areas."

Pilots of powered aircraft need to be mindful of the rules in Part 91 regarding giving way to unpowered aircraft.

The tourism boom at Queenstown and Wanaka means more operators running more helicopters, there are more paragliders and hang gliders – many from overseas – and they're all sharing the same airspace.

Jeanette Lusty says she's sure paragliders busting controlled airspace is mostly an 'innocent' breach.

"There've been some recent airspace changes, and some paragliding and hang gliding pilots may not realise just where the airspace limits are," she says.

"Unfortunately, the helicopter pilots cannot do much more than tell air traffic control when they see hang gliders and paragliders where they shouldn't be, so ATC can warn other operators."

Jeanette says the issue is not just the result of the increase in tourism.

"It's the terrain in that area, as well. Anything can suddenly emerge from the shadows of the mountains. Or a helicopter could suddenly round a bend to find an unknowing paraglider or hang glider in its path.

"It's an extremely dangerous situation for both."

The Hang Gliding and Paragliding Association (NZHGPA), certificated under Part 149, says it works to ensure that every would-be pilot, including those from overseas – who must register as a member in order to be able to fly in New Zealand – is familiar with airspace requirements.

The chief executive officer of the NZHGPA, Evan Lamberton, says there is a large and increasing number of pilots coming in from overseas.

"We allow them to fly here on their foreign licence. But they are required to familiarise themselves with our airspace rules and charts. They're also required to contact local pilots in the area to get a briefing on the conditions of the area they intend to fly.

*"...individual pilots have to be aware of the other's likely presence, and fly accordingly."*

# ers and Powered Aircraft

"But with the numbers of paragliding and hang gliding pilots we have in the country now, both local and visitors, there's always going to be a random who doesn't care.

"But we do take that seriously. When that's brought to our attention, we try to identify them, investigate the allegation, and if necessary, take disciplinary action."

That disciplinary action includes, as a last resort, relieving the errant pilot of their certificate to fly.

Evan says paragliders will launch from one area, but will do a 'cross-country' some distance from that original launch site.

"So they can be anywhere really, not just in one area.

"That's why I believe both paragliding and helicopter pilots need to vigilantly exercise the 'see and avoid' rule. If everyone knows what's on the charts, and what airspace they are flying in, that is the most we can hope for.

"Beyond that, the individual pilots have to be aware of the other's likely presence, and fly accordingly."

Evan says the paragliding aircraft are brightly coloured, will be sailing under the cloud base and sometimes close to the hills to get lift.

"Although they are relatively easy to see, and quite manoeuvrable, powered pilots need to know that paragliders are quite slow-moving. They cannot get out of the way of a powered aircraft very easily or quickly. All they can do is to turn to make their presence obvious, but their ability to fly away from the danger presented by the trajectory of another aircraft is limited.

"We've had a couple of incidents on the west coast of Auckland, where well-known, marked flying sites were 'invaded' by light aircraft tourist flights flying low.

"It's a real concern for us that someone will get hurt or killed in this situation."

Evan Lamberton says it's also little known that paragliders (and hang gliders) are extremely susceptible to wake turbulence.

"The biggest worry for us is that the turbulence created by a helicopter, even one some distance away, is enough to cause total loss of control of the paraglider. It can happen without the pilot of the aircraft even being aware of the effect of their aircraft's wake turbulence, even after they've gone by."

Jeanette Lusty says the CAA is keen to work with the NZHGPA to raise awareness of the possible conflict in paragliders, hang gliders and powered aircraft all sharing the same bit of sky.

Evan Lamberton is also keen.

"It would be great if our members were able to speak at aero club nights, to talk to their members about the areas we're likely to be, what they should look out for, and raise their awareness that the danger is as much to us, as it is to them." ■



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