

# Bush birds



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Precision Landing



Judges stand next to the runway.

Planes will take off and touch down in the shortest possible distances in the Healthy Bastards Bush Pilot Champs at Omaka today.

It is the second year the Marlborough Aero Club has run the event and club member Bruce Gibson says 60 pilots from around the country have registered.

Bruce, an aircraft engineering contractor, will be among them and was practising some manoeuvres this week in his 1957 Piper Super Cub.

He keeps the fabric-covered aircraft in a friend's hangar at Omaka but often flies it back to his Kekerengu base where neighbouring farms have small air strips he can use.

Clarence river valley is a favourite flying area, he says, and has the sort of terrain where bush flying skills come into their own.

"You're flying in the bush where you've only got a certain length of bush or riverbed or paddock to land in. So you're having to approach at steeper angles.

"And when you take off again, you may have an amount of flat land, but there will be bush or trees all around."

The Piper, he says, is a very basic aeroplane.

Its cockpit controls are confined to air speed, altitude, engine power, vertical speed and a slip indicator that helps the pilot keep the plane in balance.

With a 4 cylinder, 160 horsepower, 5000cc engine, the Piper runs at 2700 RPM and has a 100 kilometre an hour (55 knots) take-off speed.

Small planes usually need a 200 metre run to take off, he says, but prizes will be awarded today to pilots who can get their craft in the air in a much shorter distance. Bruce can lift the Piper in 50 metres, but says more experienced pilots will get their planes in the air in much less. How?

"You're holding the aircraft at full power on the ground so the maximum power is being generated," he explains.

Wing flaps can be used to augment the lift, but that also creates more drag, slowing acceleration.

When the plane does get off the ground its nose will be down - "the plane isn't really wanting to fly" - but by holding it level the pilot can help it into its normal flying speed.

Landing in the shortest distance is a second challenge - Bruce says his best effort has been 70 metres - and "spot landing", setting the plane down in a designated spot, a third.

"It's just fun. You're looking at the wind, it controls how your ground speed is and your rate of descent and how fast you come down."

The bush pilot championships replicate the challenges faced when flying in the bush, he says. Top-dressing pilots have them mastered, landing their planes in the most inhospitable terrain then getting them up in the air again.

Bruce learned to fly 30 years ago while doing his aviation engineering apprenticeship.

It seemed to complement the work, he says.

"Then I got into other things: motorcycles, travelling, beaches ..."

His interest in flying was rekindled in recent years and his private pilot's log book records him flying planes ranging from fabric microlights to an Eastern Bloc taildragger, the PZL Wilga.

The Healthy Bastards Bush Pilot Champs starts today at 10.30am and continues during the