



Happy traveler

Triumphant return to Florida

BY DAVE HIRSCHMAN

AOPA's 2012 Tougher Than A Tornado sweepstakes Husky will have travelled to all four corners of the United States by the time it is awarded to its winner in Palm Springs, California, this fall.

It's already been to western Montana and coastal Maine. But returning to Lakeland, Florida, where it was tossed about by the infamous 2011 Sun 'n Fun tornado—and earned its “tougher than a tornado” moniker—was perhaps the most challenging outing to date from a weather standpoint.

PHOTOGRAPHY BY CHRIS ROSE

The 2012 Sun 'n Fun Fly-In brought with it gorgeous sunshine for almost the entire week of the event. But getting there in advance from AOPA's home base in the mid-Atlantic in a VFR-only airplane required making lots of “over, under, or around” decisions regarding the low ceilings and rain that can almost always be found on the 750-nm route in early spring.

A persistent overcast in Maryland and Virginia, rainshowers in North Carolina, thunderstorms in South Carolina, and headwinds and turbulence in Florida,



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SWEEPSTAKES**



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The Tornado Husky is great for surveying beaches, and its big tires and abundant power allow it to easily take off and land on them. During the eight-hour flight to the Sun 'n Fun Fly-In, the AOPA Huskys flew over coastlines in South Carolina, Georgia, and Florida.

made the southbound trip especially challenging from a weather standpoint, but still safely doable with the Tornado Husky's capable tools.

The instrument panel has a Garmin GPSMAP 696 linked to graphical XM Satellite Weather that allows pilots to make informed choices about conditions well beyond what they can see through the windshield. The Doppler radar displays as well as METARs and TAFs proved especially handy as weather came into play throughout the trip, which began on an overcast afternoon in Maryland.

Instead of making the trip solo, I was accompanied by AOPA President Craig Fuller in his own airplane, a 1999 Husky A-1A that he was bringing to Sun 'n Fun for the week. (Huskys run in packs!)

Leaving Maryland, we crept along under the overcast; flew through the well-known notch in the mountains at Harpers Ferry, the historic town where the Potomac and Shenandoah rivers meet; and continued southwest through Virginia's scenic Shenandoah Valley.

We finally happened upon our first blue sky there and climbed to 6,500 feet where we easily topped the low clouds. We had planned to fly to the Atlanta area but a building line of rain and thunderstorms seen on the XM Weather display along that route convinced us to make a left turn toward the coast instead. In addition to being more direct, it also has much lower elevations and, on this day, fewer clouds.

On to Frogmore

We refueled in Danville, Virginia, then

set our sights on South Carolina's Beaufort County Airport (a.k.a. "Frogmore International") and expected to arrive a few minutes after sunset. Having elected to go over the clouds on the first leg of the trip, we went around them on the second, but still managed to get good and wet at the edges of a few downpours in the Carolinas.

Paul Harrop, the videographer who recently joined AOPA staff, traveled in the Tornado Husky with me, making his first cross-country trip in a GA airplane. I guess I felt compelled to reassure him about the weather many times during the journey, and the laconic Oklahoman eventually tired of my frequent (and false) pronouncements that each line of showers we went around would be the last before a "straight shot" to our destination.

"You don't need to keep saying that," he told me. "I'll panic when you panic—and not before."

For the record, no one in our traveling party ever panicked. But I did push the power on the Tornado Husky's 180-horsepower Lycoming engine up and had the three-blade MT prop singing at 2,500 rpm for the final dash into Beaufort. (My wingman, whose 13-year-old Husky is equipped with normal-size tires instead of the Tornado Husky's 29-inch Alaskan Bushwheels, had no trouble keeping up.)

We arrived in Beaufort a few minutes after sunset and landed on the east-facing Runway 7 with the powerful LED landing lights on the Tornado Husky's left wing putting out a beam powerful enough to stun the swarms of sand flies that call the marsh home.



The Tornado Husky was battered by last year's destructive Sun 'n (not-so) Fun twister. But the 2012 event brought perfect weather and a full week of Florida sunshine.



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The next morning brought patchy fog and rain, but conditions improved enough by midmorning to get under way. The last leg to central Florida involved a stiff headwind and air lumpy enough to convince Harrop to put down his video camera. We hugged the East Coast as a flight of two until Savannah, Georgia, then turned inland and flew under the clouds for a time, then over them, to Cross City, our final refueling point and a time-honored stop for many fliers on the way to or from Sun 'n Fun.

Welcome to Florida

The Tornado Husky, which had a few good baths on the way south from the passing rain, sparkled in the Florida sunshine as it prepared to greet Sun 'n Fun visitors.

Those who remembered seeing the storm-damaged Husky last year were quick to comment on its transformation.

"It sure looks a lot better now than it did at this time last year," said Dan Ocenasek, a Florida pilot who first saw the hard-luck airplane the day after it and many other airplanes were ravaged by the 2011 twister that blew through the spring aviation gathering. "It looked a little rough the last time I saw it."

The Tornado Husky got off lightly compared to scores of other airplanes

that were severely damaged or destroyed by those violent winds. Its elevator had to be replaced along with one horizontal stabilizer and the right aileron. But the same craftsmen who built the Tornado Husky in Afton, Wyoming, have had a chance to make the airplane as good as new; its return to vigorous good health is complete.

"I like tough airplanes—and this is one tough airplane," said Gretta Thorworth, who is building a home and hangar at Kentmorr Airpark (3W3) on Maryland's Eastern Shore. "It wasn't bashed up too badly last year. But it definitely looks like it's fully recovered now."

Bill Scheidegger from upstate New York said he'll put the Tornado Husky on skis in winter and floats in summer if he wins the 2012 AOPA sweepstakes.

"I'd want to do it all," said Scheidegger who currently owns a Cessna 172. "I'd want to fly it year round, and it would be the perfect complement to the airplanes I already own and fly."

As usual, the 29-inch Alaskan Bush-wheel tundra tires attracted a lot of attention, as did the teakwood floor, Garmin GPSMAP 696 portable GPS, vortex generators, and three-blade MT prop. Also, AOPA members want to know that their airplane is getting lots of personalized attention and exceptional



maintenance, and it is. The airplane's first annual inspection was performed in February (see "Happy Birthday," March 2012 *AOPA Pilot*), and it's getting oil changes without fail every 50 flying hours.

Sun 'n Fun visitors were full of questions about ways they can increase their chances of winning the Tornado Husky, and the answer is automatic annual renewal. Those who sign up to automatically renew their AOPA membership each year get five extra chances to win.

And those who have been enrolled in the program more than two years get 10 additional chances every year. The last three AOPA sweepstakes winners all have had automatic membership renewals (which also cuts down on unwanted junk mail from AOPA). Also, those who take AOPA Foundation Air Safety Institute online courses get extra sweepstakes entries.

AOPA members gave the Tornado Husky an enthusiastic reception at Sun 'n Fun.

Even though fewer than one-third of current AOPA members have tail-wheel endorsements, those who visited the Tornado Husky at Sun 'n Fun said they were drawn to the rugged airplane because of the freedom and adventure it represents.

A few big trips remain for the Tornado Husky. It will travel to Oshkosh, Wisconsin, in July for AirVenture, and then on to AOPA Summit in Palm Springs where its future owner can take possession of the frisky, go-anywhere, land-anywhere adventure machine.

"I'll be waiting by the phone for you to call," said Larry Ferman, an amphibian pilot from Danville, Kentucky. "If someone from AOPA invites me to Palm Springs in the fall, I'll know that I should plan on flying the Tornado Husky back home."

AOPA

For a chance to win this rugged, versatile, and highly capable airplane, simply renew your AOPA membership any time before August 31, 2012. And for extra chances, sign up for automatic annual renewal.

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