



**AOPA 2012
SWEEPSTAKES**

The Maine event

Flying the wild East Coast

BY DAVE HIRSCHMAN

The AOPA 2012 Sweepstakes “Tougher Than a Tornado” Husky can seem as out of place at a big airport as a monster truck on the streets of Manhattan.

The Husky was designed and built in Wyoming for flying throughout the rugged and expansive West—so what happens if its eventual winner is an

East Coast city slicker? Could an airplane optimized for rough, high-altitude airports be useful in other regions where elevations are low, distances are short, and paved airports are plentiful?

An autumn trip to rural Maine in the Tornado Husky showed the answer is, unequivocally, yes.

PHOTOGRAPHY BY CHRIS ROSE



Plus—View the video.



Backcountry packer

Sure the Tornado Husky can take off and land at short and rough airstrips—but what can it bring?

A lack of baggage capacity is a frequent shortcoming of many STOL designs. The Tornado Husky, a 2011 A-1C, has a main baggage area behind the back seat that holds up to 50 pounds. There's also a rear baggage area that's good for an additional 30 pounds. A total of 80 pounds may not sound like much, but here, in addition to two adults and a full load of fuel (52 gallons), is what we were able to bring:

- Two tents, two sleeping bags, two bed rolls, two backpacks with clothes for two for four days
- One camp stove, one coffee pot, one cooking pot, two water bottles, two knives, forks, and spoons, and two Leatherman tools
- One cooler containing food and drinks for two people for two days (including crackers, cheese, apples, sausage, breakfast bars)
- One fishing rod and one camera bag and tripod
- A first-aid kit, soft soft-sided tool bag, one quart of motor oil, one canopy cover and cowl plugs
- Two cell phones and one laptop computer
- Two headsets, sunglasses, charts, a portable GPS

Loading and unloading the Tornado Husky feels a bit like being a circus clown in that old gag where they put an unending stream of items in and out of a tiny vehicle. Loading the airplane can be a puzzle. In general, light and odd-shape gear goes in the aft stowage area. Heavier items, and things that you may want to reach during flight, go behind the seat.

With a payload of 925 pounds, the Tornado Husky will carry just about anything that fits inside.

—DH



Following the rugged Maine coast (left) inevitably leads to “lobster pounds” where the “bugs” are cooked over smoky wood fires (top right). AOPA President Craig Fuller and his Husky at Old Acton Airfield (center). New York City and the rising Freedom Tower from the perch of the Husky (below).

The Tornado Husky transported a pilot, passenger, and camping gear from one of America’s most densely populated urban centers in the mid-Atlantic to some of its most scenic natural areas in New England in less than a half day. And the journey itself provided an incomparable perch for viewing cityscapes and wilderness, required sharp stick-and-rudder skills at a narrow and obstructed grass airstrip, and gave everyone who came along an entirely new perspective on a region they thought they already knew.

“I’ve flown over this area countless times in faster airplanes at much higher altitudes,” said AOPA President and CEO Craig Fuller, who accompanied the Tornado Husky in his own 1998 Aviat Husky A-1A. “But from the vantage point of the Husky, you get a real sense of the places you’re flying over. You see more, and in far greater detail. It makes flying a much more intimate, interesting, and memorable experience.”

From AOPA’s home base in Frederick, Maryland, the Huskys flew north on a crystal-clear fall morning and passed through New York’s Hudson River VFR corridor before landing at Hartford-Brainard Airport in Hartford, Connecticut, for fuel (and a turf runway that’s easy on soft tires). From there, we continued north to Old Acton Airfield (02ME), a privately owned 2,400-foot grass strip carved from the Maine woods that would serve as our launching pad for a series of flights throughout the region.

The airstrip is owned by John and Ann Marie Nadeau, and John is a Recreational Aviation Foundation (RAF) director and former regional representative for New England. He, along with cohorts Bob Burley and Andy Rowe, (RAF liaisons for Vermont and New Hampshire respectively) put together an itinerary that included landing sites on rocky offshore islands, apple orchards, and mountain valleys. And plenty of open areas that aren’t airports at all make perfectly suitable landing sites for backcountry airplanes like the Tornado Husky.

Burley, also a Husky owner and pilot, commonly flies his airplane (an A-1B) from pastures in the summertime and frozen lakes in winter. Operating from actual airports, for him, is relatively rare.

“In the summer, I do most of my flying from a pasture,” said the former U.S. Air Force B-52 pilot. “In the winter, I move my airplane to a hangar to keep the snow off, but my favorite places to visit are frozen lakes.”

Burley forgoes skis for his airplane (“I’m inherently lazy and don’t want to go to the trouble of putting them on and taking them off,” he says) and says the Husky’s standard tires are just fine for landing on hard-packed snow.

Although bush flying in the United States is largely regarded as a Western phenomenon, the same flying skills that backcountry pilots must master to fly at high density altitudes, and short, rough, and narrow airstrips, can be learned and honed in the Northeast. Aeronautical charts (and the expansive downward view from a Husky cockpit) show hundreds of grass airfields throughout the region, and many, many more exist that aren’t on the charts at all. There are more than 5,000 general aviation airports in the United States—and more than three times that many private strips.

Damien DelGaizo, founder of Andover Flight Academy in northern New Jersey, draws pilots from around the world to his specialized courses in flying tailwheel airplanes at short, rough, obstructed fields.

“We build a skill set that gives pilots the confidence to negotiate these kinds of strips— whether they’re on airports or off airports,” said DelGaizo, who also produces instructional videos (*Tailwheel 101*, *Tailwheel 201*, and *Ski Flying*). “Our airstrip is 2,000 feet long, and for us, that’s normal. But for a lot of pilots, a 2,000-foot strip is intimidating.”

DelGaizo brings his students to nearby private strips and landing areas that are much shorter to show them how capable backcountry airplanes really are, how precisely they can be flown, and methods to approach more



steeply and land slower, and shorter. Specialized aircraft such as the Tornado Husky increase the safety margins at such places.

Also, DelGaizo says that the knowledge and skills pilots develop to get safely in and out short, rough, and obstructed airfields are transferable to every other aircraft they fly.

"If you ever have an emergency or decide to make a precautionary landing, these skills come into play," he said.

While most GA airplanes are well capable of operating from unimproved airstrips, the Tornado Husky handles them with aplomb.

The approach at Old Acton Airfield requires descending through a narrow clearing in the trees, touching down on a slightly downhill grade, then decelerating on the remaining uphill portion. There's a hangar and tie-downs on the right, a rock quarry on the left, and heavy equipment and tall trees at the far end.

On the afternoon of our arrival, the wind over the hilly terrain surrounding the airfield brought a gusty, quartering headwind with lots of sinking air on final, followed by an abrupt calm below the tops of the 60-foot trees.

A seemingly endless carpet of red and orange leaves spread out before us, interrupted only by placid lakes and thin layers of fog.

The Tornado Husky with its 180-horsepower Lycoming O-360 engine, quick braking action from a three-blade MT prop, and soft 29-inch Alaskan Bushwheels that roll over just about anything, made for a stress-free approach and landing. We were easily stopped at mid-field with light braking.

Taking off with two people, nearly full fuel and gear, the airplane leapt off the ground in less than 300 feet and cleared the surrounding trees and hills by a wide and comfortable margin.

"Airstrips that are theoretically possible in other GA airplanes are total yawners in a Husky," Burley said. "Huskys have so much capability that few airports even come close to testing their maximum performance."

After a full tour of coastal Maine and bits of northern New Hampshire on mostly cloudy days, the final morning of our long weekend there dawned sunny and cool.

Once airborne, a seemingly endless carpet of red and orange leaves spread out before us, interrupted only by placid lakes and thin layers of fog in the river valleys. Boston, New York City, Philadelphia, Baltimore, and Washington, D.C., all were within 500 nm—easily reachable on a single tank of fuel.

Yet those bustling places seemed a world away.

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