

Seagulls in Memphis

by Lt. Gary Ambrose

Another good deal, an all-Navy crew flying an Air Force 737 (T-43). The Air Force skipper gave us the keys to take the jet to Millington, Tennessee, so some of us could get orders, do a records review, and get some BBQ. We flew down, and after the detailer visit and chow, we were ready to head back to San Antonio.

As we approached the hold-short at the municipal airport (no ATIS available), we heard, "Gator cleared for takeoff."

We finished the checklist and began our takeoff roll. At about 110 KIAS, I noticed a large flock of gray-and-white birds crossing left to right at mid-field, just above the ground. One or two seconds later, we heard a loud bang as one of the birds hit my windscreen and half of the flock headed toward the No. 2 engine intake. The copilot was calling, "Go, rotate."

I called, "Abort," brought the engines into max reverse and applied moderate brakes. The copilot simultaneously pulled up the speed brakes. We stopped within 2,000 feet. We still had more than 1,500 feet of runway remaining.



In the T-43, we are very “go” oriented. Our takeoff brief says that after 80 KIAS, we only abort for fire, engine failure, or a condition that makes the aircraft unsafe for flight. Seeing all the birds diving for No. 2’s intake and not being sure whether the windscreen was cracked, qualified for the “unsafe for flight” part.

The high-speed abort in itself was no big deal. We only practice them in the simulator once a year, but this keeps us all proficient. The part I thought interesting was how, as we taxied back in for an inspection, the FBO lineman asked if we had hit some seagulls. I wondered if he had ESP and asked him how he knew that. He said, “They are all over this place. People have been hitting them a lot lately.”

I thought that bit of info would have been nice to know earlier in the day (although it probably would not have changed the outcome). That’s when I thought about the migratory bird information posted in Base Ops. You know, the stuff on the wall you look at but don’t ever read.

After a thorough inspection, we determined that while no birds had gone down the intakes, they had struck the main gear. After scraping

off bird carcasses, we ran the motors to high power and departed without further incident.

On the way home, I thought about the next time I would fly into a small airport without ATIS. I would do a little more research about the field, including bird conditions. I also reflected on the importance of good ORM. Even though we would have normally continued our takeoff for a bird strike after 80 KIAS, the severity and location caused both pilots to think abort, even though we were just at refusal/rotate speed when the strikes occurred.

Lt. Ambrose was flying with the 562nd FTS at the time of this incident. He has just reported to VPU-1.

The USAF BASH web site (www.afsc.saia.af.mil/AFSC/Bash) provides historical information on bird migration tracks and high-risk periods. Another new web site developed by the USAF, which is just coming on-line, gives real-time alerts, using NEXRAD radars. Reports of large-scale bird activity in areas of the continental U.S. are posted hourly (www.ahas.com). Use these sites in your planning.—Ed. 🇺🇸