AIRPROX Insight

DIRECTOR UKAB'S MONTHLY UPDATE January 2023

AIRPROX OF THE MONTH

Differences in perspective…

PHOTO: Renatas Repcinskas/Shutterstock

While the distance apart might seem okay to you, it might be too close for comfort to someone else

For my first Insight of 2023 I want to talk about some considerations when flying in Class D airspace, although some of these matters will be equally applicable to flight outside controlled airspace i.e., in Class G. By way of example, I have chosen **Airprox 2022137** to illustrate a few things that the UK Airprox Board sees cropping up fairly regularly both inside and outside controlled airspace.

This Airprox occurred when a Robinson R44 was flying southbound, VFR in the London CTR and was overtaken by a PC-12 on the same routing at around the same altitude. Both pilots were under Radar Control (because they were in Class D airspace) but both had received VFR clearances from the Heathrow SVFR controller.

The controller had passed Traffic Information to both pilots about the other aircraft; obviously, with the PC-12 initially being behind them, the R44 pilot wasn't visual with it but the PC-12 pilot announced that they were visual with the helicopter. The PC-12 passed it on the right with what the pilot judged to be 'suitable visual clearance' but at a distance that the R44 pilot thought was 'uncomfortably close'.

Let's start by talking about a couple of specifics when flying under VFR in Class D airspace. As with all controlled airspace, pilots have to comply with instructions and clearances issued by controllers. However, being under Radar Control in Class D airspace doesn't mean that pilots should expect the controller to issue vectors or separation instructions; in this case, both pilots had been cleared to proceed under VFR and, in Class D airspace, this means that the controller is obliged to pass Traffic Information to pilots under VFR about all other flights.

However, it does not imply that the controller will interject to ensure that safe separation between VFR flights is maintained. I like to think of it as a type of 'contract' between the controller and the pilot (which is also applicable under a Traffic Service or Deconfliction Service in Class G airspace) whereby the controller undertakes to tell the pilot about other traffic that the pilot needs to consider, and the pilot undertakes to ensure that they are separated from it.

Simply put, that means 'they (the controller) tell me about it, and I will stay clear of it'. Usually, this involves the pilot declaring that they are visual with the announced traffic, which indicates to the controller that the pilot will take their own – visually judged – separation.

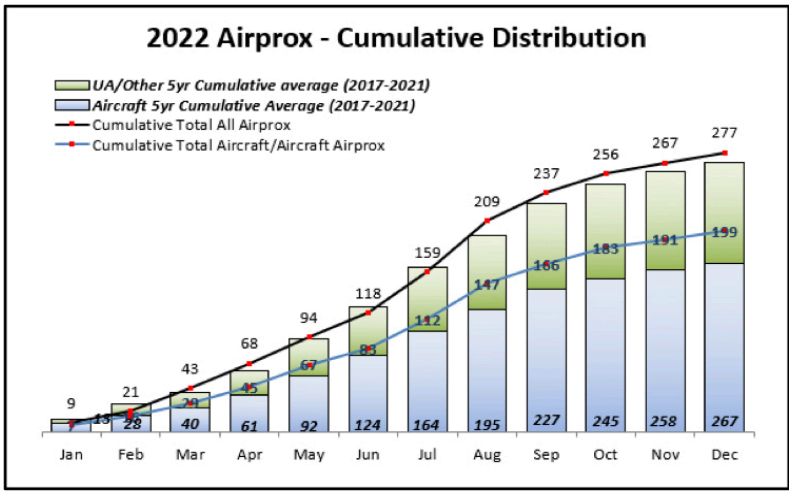
But what to do if you don't sight the aircraft in question? Well, you don't have to see the aircraft to know that it's there (the controller has just told you where it is) so why not make an adjustment to your track and/or altitude before you sight it to ensure that adequate separation will be maintained even if you don't see it? Also, tell the controller that you cannot see the other aircraft – this might prompt them to issue more Traffic Information and, if you

still can't see it and are getting concerned, ask the controller for avoidance advice.

In the case of this Airprox, the PC-12 pilot was told about the R44 and responded that they were visual with the helicopter; therefore, the controller had fulfilled their side of the 'contract' and it was down to the PC-12 pilot to fulfil theirs by taking adequate separation from it. Of course, the PC-12 pilot felt they had done just that, but the R44 pilot was of a different view.

There's no doubt that the VFR routing taken by both pilots in this example is quite constrained in terms of altitude and lateral limits, but it's clear that passing another aircraft at a safe distance is of paramount importance. The Board considered that there had been no risk of collision in this case because the PC-12 pilot had been visual with the R44 throughout the overtaking manoeuvre. However, the Board also thought that there had perhaps not been sufficient separation had the R44 pilot manoeuvred unexpectedly.

There is a useful summary of airspace classifications – and the rules that apply to each – on page 65 of the latest edition of the Skyway Code (CAP1535S Skyway Code Version 3.pdf (caa.co.uk)). This is a neat summary of information in the UK AIP and other CAPs issued by the CAA. I'll leave you with this final thought – when passing another aircraft, do you do so by your own margins, or do you consider what the other pilot might be comfortable with?



UKAB MONTHLY ROUND-UP

This month we evaluated 18 Airprox, including two UnmannedAircraft/Other events – one of these UA/Other Airprox was reported by the piloted aircraft and the other by the UA flyer which was fully evaluated.

Of the 17 full evaluations, five were classified as risk-bearing – two were category A (risk of collision: aircraft proximity in which serious risk of collision existed) and three were category B (safety not assured: aircraft proximity where safety of the aircraft may have been compromised). The Board made one Safety Recommendation at the January meeting, that 'Cotswold Airport reviews its published procedures and considers creation of circuit occupancy limitations to ensure that traffic complexity levels are appropriate.'.

The graphic (right) gives a full picture (give-or-take one or two reports that might be submitted late) of the reporting levels for 2022. The number of aircraft-to-aircraft reports received is almost 20% higher than the five-year average; when we take the period of COVID-19 restrictions into account, it is still about 14% higher than we'd normally expect.

So, what can be done to reduce the number of Airprox? Well, I would never discourage reporting as this enables us to identify potential areas of weakness, but perhaps there is more that each of you could do to reduce the likelihood of a close encounter? Why not have a browse through the UKAB website (airproxboard.org.uk) and take a look at some of the Insights, magazines and analysis that we do to try to improve safety in UK airspace.