

FAA records detail hundreds of close calls between airplanes and drones

By **Craig Whitlock** August 20, 2015

On Sunday, a swarm of small rogue drones disrupted air traffic across the country on a scale previously unseen in U.S. skies.

At 8:51 a.m., a white drone startled the pilot of a JetBlue flight, appearing off the aircraft's left wing moments before the jet landed at Los Angeles International Airport. Five hours later, a quadcopter drone whizzed beneath an Allegiant Air flight as it approached the same runway. Elsewhere in California, pilots of light aircraft reported narrowly dodging drones in San Jose and La Verne.

In Washington, a Cessna pilot reported a drone cruising at 1,500 feet in highly restricted airspace over the nation's capital, forcing the U.S. military to scramble fighter jets as a precaution.

In Louisville, a silver and white drone almost collided with a training aircraft. In Chicago, United Airlines Flight 970 reported seeing a drone pass by at an altitude of 3,500 feet.

All told, 12 episodes — including other incidents in New Mexico, Texas, Illinois, Florida and North Carolina — were recorded Sunday of small drones interfering with airplanes or coming too close to airports, according to previously undisclosed reports filed with the Federal Aviation Administration.

Before last year, close encounters with rogue drones were unheard of. But as a result of a sales boom, small, largely unregulated remote-control aircraft are clogging U.S. airspace, snarling air traffic and giving the FAA fits.

Pilots have reported a surge in close calls with drones: nearly 700 incidents so far this year, according to FAA statistics, about triple the number recorded for all of 2014. The agency has acknowledged growing concern about the problem and its inability to do much to tame it.

So far, the FAA has kept basic details of most of this year's incidents under wraps, declining to release reports that are ordinarily public records and that would spotlight where and when the close calls occurred.

The Washington Post obtained several hundred of the rogue-drone reports from a government official who objected to the FAA's secrecy. An FAA spokeswoman, Laura Brown, declined to comment on the reports obtained by The Post.

The documents show that remote-control planes are penetrating some of the most guarded airspace in the country.

Drones have also continued to pose a headache for Secret Service agents seeking to protect the president, according to the FAA reports.

On March 29, the Secret Service reported that a rogue drone was hovering near a West Palm Beach, Fla., golf course where President Obama was hitting the links. Secret Service spokesman Brian Leary confirmed the incident. He declined to provide further details but said the Secret Service "has procedures and protocols in place to address these situations when they occur."

Two weeks later, just after noon on April 13, authorities received a report of a white drone flying in the vicinity of the White House. Military aircraft scrambled to intercept the drone, which was last seen soaring over the Tidal Basin and heading toward Arlington, Va., according to the FAA reports.

Both episodes occurred after a widely reported scare in January, when a small quadcopter drone crashed on the White House grounds, briefly triggering a lockdown and reinforcing concerns about security at the executive mansion.

U.S. officials have said they are growing more concerned about the possibility that terrorists might seek to use small drones. In a July 31 intelligence bulletin, the Department of Homeland Security said it had recorded more than 500 cases since 2012 in which unauthorized drones have loitered over "sensitive sites and critical installations."

According to the FAA documents, military aircraft flying near U.S. bases or in restricted areas have also reported close calls with drones on at least a dozen occasions this year.

On July 10, the pilot of an Air Force F-15 Strike Eagle said a small drone came within 50 feet of the fighter jet. Two weeks later, the pilot of a Navy T-45 Goshawk flying near Yuma, Ariz., reported that a drone buzzed 100 feet underneath.

Pervasive intruders

Despite a prohibition against small drones flying within five miles of airports or above 400 feet, the FAA documents show that the robotic aircraft have become pervasive intruders, hovering near runways and busy air traffic corridors.

Pilots are also spotting the small drones at altitudes previously unheard of — higher than 10,000 feet. On May 30, crews from Caribbean Airlines and JetBlue separately reported seeing a drone with colored lights at an altitude of 12,000 feet about 25 miles southeast of John F. Kennedy Airport in New York.

The FAA reports are brief and preliminary in nature. In some cases, follow-up investigations determined that objects pilots had assumed to be drones were in fact something else.

On May 9, the pilot of United Airlines Flight 863 — traveling from San Francisco to Sydney — reported that the Boeing 777 hit a drone at an altitude of 3,000 to 4,000 feet along the California coast.

“Sparks were observed after contact,” according to the FAA report, which said the 777 kept flying because it did not appear to be damaged. A United spokesman said it was later determined that the plane had hit a bird, not a drone.

In most cases, rogue drones disappear without a trace. The aircraft are usually too small to be detected by radar and do not carry transponders that would broadcast their locations. Unlike other planes, these drones are not marked with serial numbers, and their owners are not required to register them.

No incident has resulted in a midair collision. But in dozens of cases, pilots reported that drones flew within 500 feet of their aircraft, so close that they usually had no time to react.

On March 21, the crew of Delta Air Lines Flight 874 told air traffic controllers in New York that a small drone passed within 50 feet of the airliner’s left wing near LaGuardia Airport. One month earlier, on Feb. 24, a Delta flight heading toward Los Angeles reported that a red and black drone coming from the opposite direction overflew the Boeing 757 by 100 feet.

In an incident near Los Angeles International Airport, American Airlines Flight 287 reported on June 8 that a blue and silver drone appeared 50 feet off its left side, just above the wing.

Elsewhere, regional carrier Air Wisconsin reported May 10 that a drone whizzed “right off the nose” of the passenger plane at an altitude of 5,000 feet near Charlotte. Nine days later, another Air Wisconsin flight reported that a drone passed within 10 feet of the aircraft outside Philadelphia.

United and other air carriers declined to comment, referring questions to Airlines for America, an industry group.

Melanie Hinton, a spokeswoman, said the trade association would continue to work with the FAA to educate the public about the proper use of drones. “The U.S. aviation system is the safest in the world, and nothing is more important to us than the safety of our passengers, crew and aircraft,” she said in an e-mail.

Rogue drones are posing a particular threat to small aircraft that often fly at lower altitudes than major air carriers.

The pilot of a single-engine Piper P-28 reported making a “hard left bank” on June 20 to avoid colliding with a silver drone about 5,200 feet above Groton, Conn. On Aug. 1, a Cessna reported that a yellow drone the size of “a dishwasher” came within 50 feet as it was flying near Johnstown, Pa.

Most of the drones were described as small and likely weighing only a few pounds, according to the reports. Aviation safety

experts say that even tiny drones could trigger a disaster by crashing into a propeller or windshield, or getting sucked into a jet engine.

Small drones have become hugely popular with consumers who fly them for recreation. Many models come equipped with sophisticated video cameras yet retail for less than \$500 and can be flown with little or no training.

The Consumer Electronics Association estimates that hobbyists will buy 700,000 of the aircraft in the United States this year.

‘Only a matter of time’

No city has seen more illicit drones than New York. Since March, pilots flying into or out of LaGuardia and Kennedy airports have reported encounters with drones 33 times, according to the FAA reports.

In an interview, Sen. Charles E. Schumer (D-N.Y.) said that “the number of near misses is astounding” and predicted that it would be “only a matter of time” before a crash occurs.

Schumer pledged to introduce legislation requiring manufacturers to install technology on all drones to prevent them from flying above 500 feet, near airports or in sensitive airspace. Such technology, known as geo-fencing, relies on satellite navigation to pinpoint a drone’s location.

“Every day without this law increases the chances that a bad accident will occur,” he said.

DJI, the world’s leading seller of consumer drones, began programming such technology last year into all models sold in the United States. Brendan Schulman, the firm’s vice president of policy and legal affairs, said the software upgrade and public education efforts have proven effective.

“The vast, vast majority of drone users are flying safely and responsibly,” he said. “The real issue is that there are a handful of outliers.”

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[When drones fall from the sky: A Post investigation](#)

[Rogue drones are a growing nuisance across the U.S.](#)

[FAA rules might allow thousands of business drones](#)

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