

DEDICATED TO THE PROMOTION OF TOWNS COUNTY

# OPINIONS & COMMENTARY

## Drones ground fire-fighting helicopters

As flames rapidly spread along a hillside in Santa Paula, California, firefighters were faced with a perilous dilemma: ground night-flying helicopters working to contain the growing fire or risk an aerial collision with a thrill-seeking drone.



**RC&D**  
**Frank Riley**  
Executive Director

A Ventura County Fire Department helicopter pilot radioed in at 3:19 a.m. that a drone had been spotted flying above the scene below, apparently trying to take a photograph or video of the scene below. Air operations were immediately stopped for at least 45 minutes until the sky was clear. But at 4:05 a.m., another drone sighting occurred.

The aerial fight against the wildfire was upended for another hour while at least two helicopters with night-flying capabilities that had been deployed to help contain the Maria fire were grounded. Meanwhile, the blaze that broke out at a top South Mountain, just south of Santa Paula, shortly after 6 p.m. Thursday marched toward the small agricultural towns of Ventura and Saticoy.

The interruption of the aerial firefighting underscores growing concerns about how drones can bring added dangers to pilots battling major fires. According to the National Inter-agency Fire Center, aerial firefighting efforts have been shut down at least nine times this year because of drone use, and at least 20 drone incursions have hindered firefighting capabilities nationwide from January through October.

A report showed that of those 20 incursions, five were in California. While the unmanned aerial vehicles are small, drones can wreak incredible havoc to an aircraft. A collision with a wing, engine or any part of a larger aircraft can cause severe damage.

A bird collision with a plane can cause a plane to go down. Firefighting tactics from the sky aren't guaranteed to stop a blaze, but they can significantly slow the spread, and a fire can grow exponentially over the course of 20 minutes, let alone one or two hours.

The Maria fire spread to nearly 10,000 acres, and it's far from clear whether the interruption in water drops made an impact. Firefighting aircraft such as water-dropping helicopters and super scooper planes typically dip to 150-200 feet off the ground when dumping their loads.

In the event of a drone collision, there's only so much room an aircraft has to safely land, potentially impacting those on the ground as well. Drones have been a cause of concern for wildland firefighters for several years.

In 2015, the California Legislature passed a bill that allowed firefighters to destroy drones that impeded their efforts to battle fires and imposed and created penalties for drone operators who interfered with firefighters.

That same year, the state launched a public service campaign with a television commercial titled "If you fly, we can't," in which Cal Fire pilots talk about the danger of sharing the skies with hobby drones.

Officials have expressed frustration at not being able to catch more of those who operate the drones, speculating some are hobbyists who want to post dramatic videos on social media or sell them to TV stations.

The huge 2015 Lake fire in the San Bernardino Mountains grew after a drone interrupted plans to deploy an air tanker water drop. Beyond wildfires, drones have been known to interfere with airport traffic.

In January, London's Heathrow Airport had to halt departing flights after a drone sighting. The incident occurred just three weeks after multiple drone sightings ignited chaos at the nearby Gatwick Airport.

Drones have proved useful in combating fires, but only when in the right hands. In 2017, the Los Angeles Fire Department used the unmanned aircraft for the first time while combating the Skirball fire in Bel-Air. They provide real-time situational awareness from a bird's-eye perspective to the incident commander so they can see what's going on at their emergency and then change their tactics accordingly to mitigate the hazards.

But the Federal Aviation Administration prohibits recreational drone users from flying near emergencies and any type of accident response, law enforcement activities, firefighting or hurricane recovery efforts.

In Ventura County water dropping aircraft pounded the Maria fire as anxious residents fled their homes. As the gusts began to pick up, dozens of fire vehicles staged around homes along the rolling hillsides of West La Loma Avenue prepared to protect the properties from possible flare-ups. Agricultural employees wearing masks worked nearby in citrus groves to get ahead of the approaching fires.

Wildfires not only destroy homes and towns, but many times will blow through farms and ranches destroying everything in the path as it moves toward communities to wreak more havoc.

Drones are an upcoming wonderful tool, but when they interfere with emergency incidents drones can cause more harm than the good, they can do. Drones have great potential for the future, but one small drone in the wrong hands and in the wrong place can create situations that can lead to tremendous damage to aircraft, homes, and even lives.

Remember, if you fly, they can't, so be careful where you fly your drone.

## Like Thanksgiving

The weather finally feels right for the time of year, but it's a little confusing. August felt like September, and then in October we had more of the June weather that should have come in July. It's November now, but just a few days ago the frogs were croaking in our frog pond and the grass was as green as it was in May.

I saw the first Halloween decorations in the stores in August, and Christmas decorations showed up two weeks before Halloween. The calendar says Thanksgiving is this week, but the year cannot possibly be this old.

That feeling of time slipping by unnoticed is becoming more common. It's a side effect of our hyper-connected culture and technology which affects our brains like drugs and alcohol, though the "blackout" is not as intense or debilitating.

Let's take Facebook, for example. For all its positive benefits in enabling people to stay in touch, a significant amount of study has gone into getting us to spend as much time as possible using the platform and contributing content.

Here's how that works: We post a picture or a comment and we look to see how many comments and "likes" we get. For every little red number we see, we get a small hit of dopamine. In the brain, exactly the same reward pathway is stimulated when we eat chocolate or use cocaine, and it's also addictive.

A case can be made that any activity can be addictive. We release neuropeptides and create new neural pathways when we take drugs, but we also do that every time we learn something, or experience an emotion. Addiction happens when we create neural pathways which cause us pain when they are not regularly maintained.

How many people can go to sleep now without checking that smart phone one more time? I dare you. See if you can do it without feeling at least a little bit unsettled, or making an excuse to look for that important message - at 11 o'clock at night.

The vast majority of human history was spent in close contact with the natural world and its rhythms. Time moved more slowly. Its passage was measured by the movement of celestial bodies, the sun, the moon and the stars.

We lived our lives in sync with those natural rhythms. They told us when to plant and when to harvest. Holidays were so much more than ritualized shopping extravaganzas. The Winter Solstice was vitally important because it marked the return of the sun after its long retreat, and the other major observances of the year, the Spring Equinox, Summer Solstice and Autumnal Equinox, reflected the movement of the earth itself on its long journey around the Sun.

As science and technology replaced myth and magic, we became detached from the origins of our natural observances. We invented new holidays to mark the year. They were just as important to us, for they reflected our values, our beliefs and our history.

The holidays no longer circumscribe the year. Now the passage of time is measured by the next opportunity to binge-watch our favorite television series. One holiday runs into the next. Every day is Black Friday, but there is no darkness at night, no rest, and no escape from the hive mind. We're afraid of the dark, and we can't see the stars anymore.

The large part of humanity which is technologically savvy today is entering the undiscovered country. We have disconnected, some of us permanently, from the natural rhythms of the earth. We have been drawn into an addictive, hyper-connected union which provides continuous stimulation and distraction, and it happened so quickly that we have no idea of the long term implications for our species. We are losing our sense of the passage of time, of historical context, of our national identity and even our sense of self.

We have a wonderful opportunity to reverse that trend every Thanksgiving. Thanksgiving is about gratitude, and nothing is more effective than gratitude for centering us in the here-and-now. This holiday celebrates and renews the bonds of family and friendship. It is a quintessentially American holiday, and it comes without the religious and political baggage which has graffitied some of our other, more commercialized observances.

We invite you to disconnect from the Matrix this Thanksgiving. Savor every moment, every bite of stuffing, every conversation, and every nap. Look around the table and cherish the faces you see there. Remember the empty chairs, and speak the names of the departed to keep their memories alive. Know that there will be more empty chairs as the years go by, and no amount of "likes" will ever fill them.

### GUEST COLUMNS

From time to time, people in the community have a grand slant on an issue that would make a great guest editorial. Those who feel they have an issue of great importance should call our editor and talk with him about the idea. Others have a strong opinion after reading one of the many columns that appear throughout the paper. If so, please write. Please remember that publication of submitted editorials is not guaranteed.

**LETTERS TO THE EDITOR SHOULD BE E-MAILED OR MAILED TO:** Towns County Herald, Letter to the Editor, PO Box 365, Hiawassee, GA 30546. Our email address: tcherald@windstream.net. Letters should be limited to 200 words or less, signed, dated and include a phone number for verification purposes. This paper reserves the right to edit letters to conform with Editorial page policy or refuse to print letters deemed pointless, potentially defamatory or in poor taste. Letters should address issues of general interest, such as politics, the community, environment, school issues, etc. Letters opposing the views of previous comments are welcomed; however, letters cannot be directed at, nor name or ridicule previous writers. Letters that recognize good deeds of others will be considered for publication.\*  
*Note: All letters must be signed, and include the first and last name and phone number for verification.*



**The Middle Path**  
By: Don Perry  
onthemiddlepath.com

## Oh Christmas Tree

Having a live Christmas tree can be a great tradition this time of year. Let's talk about some of the different types of trees that are suitable and proper Christmas tree care so that you can have a happy, healthy tree in your home and avoid a Griswold, "Christmas Vacation" scenario.



**UGA Extension**  
**Watching and Working**  
with  
**Jacob Williams**

Three native grown trees to Georgia are firs, Leyland cypress, and red cedar. Some things to consider when purchasing a Christmas tree are needle retention, strong limbs, fragrance, and dryness.

The firs have good needle retention and remains fresh. They also have strong limbs that can support ornaments. Firs also have a good fragrance to them. Fragrance can be a good thing if you're going for a little extra Christmas spirit, but may not be a good thing if you have allergy concerns in your house. Fraser fir is the "classic" live cut Christmas tree.

Red cedar is sometimes thought of as a traditional southern Christmas tree. Red cedar also has a nice fragrance, which comes with some allergy concerns. The limbs on red cedar are not sturdy and may not be able to support as many ornaments. It can also dry out rapidly in a warm house if it isn't watered well.

Leyland cypress is a newcomer to the Christmas tree market. The limbs are soft and flexible making it more difficult to hang ornaments. Leyland has less of a scent to it than other Christmas trees. Similar to the red cedar, Leyland can dry out quickly in a warm house.

Before you even leave to buy your tree it's a good idea to select and measure the space where you'll be placing your tree. A good space is away from space heaters, fireplaces, or wood stoves. Measure how high the tree can go in your house. It can be difficult to gauge if a tree is going to fit inside when you're looking at it outdoors. Trees can appear small outside, and then seem to grow a couple of feet once you bring them inside.

When you are selecting your tree it is important to make sure that you get one that is fresh cut. A fresh cut makes means that the tree will be able to absorb water more effectively, and therefore not dry out as quickly. When you are purchasing the tree give the limbs a good shake and see if many needles fall off. Then grab a branch of a tree and pull the branch through your hand. Ideally you don't want to see many needles fall off the branch. Also check to for off color on any of the needles.

A dry Christmas tree can be a fire hazard in a house. If your tree has a fresh cut it should be able to last the entire Christmas season without drying out if you keep it well watered. There should always be water in the tree stand. Keep the water level above the cut on the tree so that the cut won't dry out and your tree is continually taking up water.

A couple of ideas for disposing of your Christmas tree after Christmas are chipping or a fish pond. Putting the tree in a fish pond whole creates a good fish habitat.

We have great locations to purchase a live Christmas tree around here, and this is the time of year to shop local, so I encourage you to check them out! If you have any questions about Christmas trees contact your local Extension Office or send me an email at Jacob.Williams@uga.edu. Merry Christmas and happy tree shopping!



## Towns County Community Calendar

Bridge Players	<b>Every Monday:</b> All Saints Lutheran	12:30 pm
Free GED prep.	<b>Every Tuesday:</b> Old Rec. Center	4 pm
Alcoholics Anon.	Sharp UMC (Men)	7 pm
Alcoholics Anon.	<b>Every Wednesday</b> Hiawassee UMC	Noon
SMART Recovery	Red Cross Building	7 pm
Bridge Players	<b>Every Thursday:</b> All Saints Lutheran	12:30 pm
Free GED prep.	Old Rec. Center	4 pm
Movers & Shakers	<b>Every Friday:</b> Sundance Grill	8 am
Alcoholics Anon.	Red Cross Building	7 pm
Alcoholics Anon.	<b>Every Sunday:</b> Red Cross Building	7 pm
Alzheimer's Supp.	<b>First Tuesday of each month:</b> McConnell Church	1:30 pm
American Legion	VFW Post 7807	4 pm
Hiaw. City Council	City Hall	6 pm
Young Harris Coun.	YH City Hall	7 pm
Quilting Bee	<b>First Wednesday of each month:</b> McConnell Church	10 am
Stephens Lodge	<b>First Thursday of each month:</b> Lodge Hall	7:30 pm
Friendship Comm.	<b>Third Thursday of each month:</b> Clubhouse	6 pm
Republican Party	Civic Center	5:30 pm
Goldwing Riders	<b>Third Saturday of each month:</b> Daniel's Restaurant	11 am
Red Cross DAT	<b>Fourth Monday of each month:</b> 1298 Jack Dayton Cir.	5:30 pm
Lions Club	<b>Fourth Tuesday of each month:</b> Daniel's Restaurant	6 pm
Hiaw. Writers	<b>Fourth Thursday</b> Hiaw. Pk. Comm. Rm.	10:30
Hiaw. Garden Club	Clubhouse	12:45 pm
Humane Shelter Bd.	<b>Last Thursday of each month:</b> Cadence Bank	5:30 pm

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## Towns County Herald

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