Construction activities at an airport are sure to complicate normal procedures. To maintain safe operations, local controllers must sustain an unusually high degree of vigilance, particularly when dealing with construction equipment in their midst. Some controller reports explain:

- ATC currently operates a portable tower due to obstructed views of runways 1/19 caused by the construction. A construction crane was recently erected in front of the portable tower, again causing obstructed views of runways 1/19 and also 14/32. Of primary concern, the view of the intersection of these runways is obstructed. This has caused numerous “close calls,” because controllers in this portable tower cannot see aircraft in or near this intersection.

Construction-related vehicle traffic in aircraft movement areas can also be a major cause of workload, as another controller reports:

- Air carrier X was cleared for takeoff. I observed a van, used to shuttle tower personnel in and out, cross the hold-short line at taxiway A. I instructed X to abort his takeoff. Due to the amount of construction, we are forced to get vehicles across active runways hundreds of times daily. Another problem that surfaces near airport work areas is the temporary signs directing pilots to alternate taxi routes.

- Due to extensive construction on the airport, some signs and markings are non-standard. A corporate aircraft passed his turn and crossed the departure end of runway 28. Air carrier Y was not rolling, but had been cleared to take more care when operations are different than normal.

Another crew apparently was on “mental autopilot” during takeoff, and forgot that the airport construction had caused a change in their usual departure routine.

- Rather than having an unusual operation trigger extra work, we pressed on and blew the turn. Another lesson: Do so. I cancelled Y’s clearance just prior to its beginning and was advised the Tower of the situation, executed a fly-by, and was advised the gear was down. I made the approach again and set the aircraft down when the right main gear collapsed. Minor damage resulted.

- At 152 feet above ground level, I approached a temporary sign that indicated a 205 degree heading within 1 DME of the airport. I blew it and were flying runway heading when Tower had to remind us to make the turn. The reason we failed to execute the maneuver properly was due to the use of runway 25 when we normally operate from runway 21, which was closed for construction. The departure from runway 21 is basically runway heading, and that is what we had in our minds. Rather than having an unusual operation trigger extra study, we pressed on and blew the turn. Another lesson: take more care when operations are different than normal.

Our reporter’s advice applies to everyone operating near an airport construction area—flight crews, controllers, ground crews, and construction crews.

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**Spring Sprucing Tip**

Spring is the time of year when airplane owners think of getting that aircraft spruced up after a long, cold winter in the hangar or out on the ramp. But let the “sprucer” beware:

- On final, I attempted to put down the landing gear. The gear appeared to operate normally, but the right main gear light was not illuminated. However, all other indicators that the gear was locked down were functioning normally. I recycled the gear, and also tested the gear-locked horns for proper operation. I advised the Tower of the situation, executed a fly-by, and was advised the gear was down. I made the approach again and set the aircraft down when the right main gear collapsed. Minor damage resulted.

When the mechanics lifted the aircraft, the gear came right down, but the downlock hook didn’t function properly. I had just picked up the aircraft from the paint shop, where they apparently got too much overspray on the gear, resulting in the hook binding.

The reporter suggested that the paint shop be requested to jack up the aircraft and exercise the landing gear several times before releasing the aircraft to the owner.
Weather-related fatal accidents once topped the light aircraft accident list. However, according to the 1996 Nall report, an annual safety report published by the Aircraft Owners and Pilots Association Flight Safety Foundation, low-level maneuvering has jumped to number one as the cause of fatalities in single-engine fixed-gear aircraft, with 36.1% of fatal accidents. More than half of all maneuvering fatalities occurred during buzzing or other unauthorized aircraft operations.

As every student of Aerodynamics 101 knows, low and slow is one of the most hazardous aerodynamic conditions—the “slow” bringing the aircraft close to stall, and the “low” putting the aircraft and its pilot in an area where recovery is altitudinally limited. In recognition of the low-and-slow flight hazard, FAR 91.119 prohibits operation of an aircraft at an altitude which, in the event of a power failure, does not allow a safe landing without hazard to persons or property on the surface.

Reports submitted to ASRS by general aviation pilots illustrate a broad range of low-level flying incidents, many of them resulting from impromptu, unplanned flights.

Sectional charts and the Airport/ Facility Directory depict many, but not all, the hazards associated with low level flight. For example, “sparsely populated” areas may suddenly become populated, as they did for this reporter.

Flying over uninhabited terrain, I suddenly came upon a golf course, with houses and golfers on the course. Before I was able to analyze the situation, I passed low overhead some golfers, maybe within 500 feet. Increased familiarity with locale would have prevented this particular event.

The next reporter was planning ahead—to the next weekend’s activities.

I was on my way home from a hunting trip and was expecting friends in a week or so who were bringing their boat. I decided to take a look at the lake as I had never been there. I made two passes over the lake to look at it. I saw one boat on the lake and I was to its side by at least 500 feet. I was not buzzing anyone on the lake.

Unfortunately for the reporter, a park ranger issued a citation requiring an appearance in U.S. District Court. An ASRS analyst notes that it is important to stay high over recreational areas to avoid restrictions that may be in excess of the FAR minimum requirements.

In our final report, a wily coyote won the day, as the pilot of a predator control aircraft pursued. The co-pilot marksman was having an off day:

We spotted a coyote...made the first pass at it and missed the shot. We circled again to make a second pass. The coyote ran to a wash and down it. This wash had a hill beside it, which hid a tree.

Any empathetic reader can fill in the balance of the scenario. The airplane struck the tree and damaged its wing, as the unsheathed coyote trotted down the dry creek bed. In this case, maintaining obstacle clearance should have been the pilot’s highest priority, since the aircraft was operating so close to the ground.