

Airplane crash April 03, 2021 in Southwestern Jefferson County - Statement for NTSB

On the afternoon of Saturday, April 3, 2021 my wife, dog, and I were camping just off Forest Service road 211 northwest of Cheesman Reservoir in Pike National Forest. The camp site location was 39.22281, -105.32023. We had a view of the Wigwam trail area and up the start of the canyon which was about 2.5 mile away to our northwest. At approximately 5:50 pm (not sure of exact time but was before 6 pm) a small single engine aircraft, mostly white in color, passed to the west of our campsite about 1/2 mile away. I estimate it was less than 1000 feet above the ground. The engine on the aircraft sounded like it was throttled back and not very loud. The aircraft seemed to be travelling pretty slow and not in a hurry to get anywhere but was travelling straight and level at that time. It was going in roughly a northwest direction towards a 9448 ft peak (39.25494, -105.35866) near the Wigwam Trailhead for the Lost Creek Wilderness Area. I had just pulled out some binoculars less than a minute before to look for animals on the surrounding hill but instead started watching the aircraft, and I thought its flight direction, low speed, and low altitude seemed unusual in that area. I initially thought there might be a small private airstrip on private property that is near the Wigwam trailhead and the plane might be intending to land there.

As the aircraft approached the 9448 ft peak it turned to the left. It entered the mouth of the canyon of Wigwam Creek near the trailhead. It looked to be less than 500 ft above the ground and travelling even slower. My thought at the time was that it was probably getting close to its stall speed. It was quite a bit lower in altitude than all the terrain in front of and to the sides of it when it entered the canyon. After entering the canyon, it then turned back somewhat sharply to right and I was looking at the right side of the aircraft. It would have been travelling roughly north to northwest. It did not look very stable in flight at that time and was travelling very low. It appeared to me that it was going to try to climb up behind the 9448 ft peak that is located on the north side of the mouth of the canyon. That is when I lost sight of it. In hindsight I suspect that was the time it impacted the ground. I watched for smoke but did not see any. Since I was viewing it through binoculars which limited my viewing area, I thought it must have climbed out around the back side of the 9448 ft peak and I just missed seeing that. I did not think it had actually crashed. It was a perfect weather day with great visibility and no clouds in the area. The sun was still up and bright. If the pilot was having trouble he could have easily turned east to avoid the mountains before entering the canyon.

Later that evening around 10:20 pm we heard a helicopter in the area and I knew then that the aircraft had in fact crashed. We broke down our camp and drove over to the trailhead where we spoke with a Jeffco deputy and a Forest Service law enforcement officer around 11:15 pm. We packed up a small first aid kit and a down sleeping bag in case we found the crash site and survivor and we headed out on the trail. My wife, dog, and I hiked in on the trail about 3/4 of a mile and then cut right off trail up the drainage on very steep terrain behind the 9448 ft peak where I expected the wreckage would be located. We got almost to the saddle behind the peak then came back down to the trail a different way but did not see any wreckage. We headed west on the trail and went about another mile but my headlamp batteries were starting to fail so we headed back to the trailhead. Along the way we passed rangers from the Civil Air Patrol that were on the south side and above the trail and spoke with them. We got back to the trailhead around 3am.

John "Jack" Higgs
Conifer, CO
[REDACTED]