

On November 29, 2023, at about 1230 hours local time, I was providing flight instruction at Watsonville Municipal Airport (KWVI) as a Certified Flight Instructor employed by Specialized Aviation. I was sitting in the copilot seat of a 1980 Cessna 172N Skyhawk II, registration N6212F, and Laszlo Juracz, a student pilot, was sitting in the pilot seat.

We had done several touch and goes on Runway 20 without incident before this event. During our last touch and go, we configured for a normal takeoff and left the ground under normal conditions. At approximately 800' MSL, I saw a black object move from the left edge of the windscreen toward the right edge, directly in our flight path. As soon as I recognized the object as a bird, I tried to alert Juracz to its presence; however, before I could say the word "bird" or react, Juracz made an utterance that I interpreted as his recognition of the bird's presence. Before either of us could move the flight controls, the bird turned toward us and contacted the airplane. I heard two distinct thumping sounds. I instructed Juracz that I was flying the airplane and directed him to look out his side window to assess whether there was damage to the left gear strut or left main gear. Juracz said both were still attached to the airplane and appeared undamaged. I began to notice the flight controls were heavier and less responsive just as Juracz said something to the effect of "it's stuck in the tail." I looked over my left shoulder and observed a large dark-colored mass on the outboard edge of the left side of the horizontal stabilizer.

I continued flying the airplane to 1,200' MSL, which is pattern altitude at KWVI, then completed a shallow bank left turn to fly the crosswind leg of the traffic pattern. I maintained that altitude and made a radio call in the blind to announce what happened and state my intentions. Another pilot who had previously made a radio call indicating a desire to approach and land at KWVI under VMC made a subsequent announcement indicating he was leaving the area. I made another radio call and completed another shallow bank left turn to fly the downwind leg of the traffic pattern. I flew a wider-than-normal downwind leg and began a rounded, shallow bank left turn to fly through a base leg onto final, making contemporaneous radio calls stating my position and intentions, and I also added 10 degrees, then 20 degrees, of flaps in an effort to slow the airplane. I was unsure as to the extent of the damage to the flight controls or aircraft structure, so I manipulated the flight controls with extreme caution and used gentle inputs. However, as I turned onto the final approach leg of the traffic pattern, I determined I was too high for a normal approach to land.

I was unwilling to attempt a forward slip maneuver, so I performed a normal go around procedure at about 600' MSL and climbed to about 1,200' MSL before flying a similar pattern using similar control inputs to maintain aircraft control and reduce stress on the flight controls and aircraft structure, making contemporaneous radio calls to report my position and intentions. I flew a wider downwind leg than in my first attempt in order to give myself more lateral distance from the airport to complete an equally shallow descent but to achieve a lower altitude at the same point in space while flying a similar descent profile as my first attempt to land. I again made a rounded, shallow bank left turn and deployed 10 degrees of flaps to slow the airplane and assist in my descent profile. As I turned onto the final approach leg, I deployed 20 degrees of flaps. When crossing the fence at the approach end of Runway 20 at KWVI, I reduced power

to idle and flew into ground effect using noticeably more force on the control wheel than normal to pitch the nose of the airplane up. I flew in ground effect for a few seconds before realizing I was experiencing a higher-than-normal descent rate and began pulling significantly harder on the control wheel to flare and avoid having the nose gear contact the ground first. I successfully landed the airplane without incident and taxied off Runway 20 at Taxiway E. I reconfigured the airplane for ground operations and taxied from Taxiway E to Taxiway A and then turned onto the ramp at Specialized Aviation, then completed a normal shutdown and aircraft securing procedure. I took several photographs of the damage to the horizontal stabilizer, preserved the bird, which had remained intact and wrapped around the leading edge of the horizontal stabilizer, and was informed that representatives of the San Jose FSDO were, coincidentally, at Specialized Aviation for another matter. I made a verbal report to those individuals and completed this written report to formalize my recollection of these events, which I delivered to those FSDO representatives.

End.

Jonathan Wizard

