

# Boeing 737...from Page 1A



**Residents heard about the big Boeing's appearance at the Blairsville Airport and turned out to watch it conduct a couple of low approaches.**  
Photo by Shawn Jarrard

Blairsville runway is only rated for aircraft up to 39,000 pounds; even without passengers, a Boeing 737 weighs about 90,000 pounds and would certainly cause damage to the runway if it landed.

So, when the aircraft appeared on global flight tracking website flightaware.com on Monday, March 22, Firebaugh and others thought that, surely, it must be a mistake. After all, there was simply no way an airplane of that magnitude would be planning to land in Blairsville.

Pilot David Phillips of Hiawassee helped to spread the word on Facebook, which was all abuzz following a livestreamed video he recorded of the plane making a low approach at the Blairsville Airport.

Phillips flies for Drake Enterprises out of Franklin, North Carolina, where he also serves as the County Airport Manager. He got a heads up on the inbound flight from his friend Greg Adams, a dentist in Blairsville and local pilot

who spotted the jetliner on FlightAware.

It wasn't immediately clear what the plane was doing, so just prior to the 737's approach, Phillips and a small crowd of spectators gathered at the airport to watch, film and take pictures.

Sure enough, the jetliner appeared in the sky and began its descent – onlookers all agaze – before pulling up about 100 feet from the ground and flying off in the direction of Western Carolina Regional Airport in Andrews, North Carolina.

As it turned out, the airplane was not planning to land at all. In fact, the passenger aircraft had no passengers at all – other than a couple of training crews testing some new technology by the plane's owner, a Florida-based company called AerSale, Inc.

In pursuit of Federal Aviation Administration approval, AerSale has been testing its AerAware Enhanced Flight Vision System that "enables a pilot to 'see' through

low visibility conditions by presenting advanced imaging technology along with real time aircraft primary flight systems data."

The system utilizes wearable headgear adapted from military to commercial use in 737's specifically. Current testing is meant to launch AerAware into private-sector adoption for safer flights in less-than-ideal landing conditions, allowing pilots to "see" when they can't see.

Of course, none of this was clear at first that Monday. Fifteen miles out from the airport, as is customary, the pilot announced his intentions, saying that he was flying an experimental 737 making a "low approach" – not a landing – at Runway 8 in Blairsville.

Phillips subsequently discovered that the plane was testing equipment after looking up its tail number, but it wasn't until the next day that Firebaugh got a call from the pilots of the modified Boeing explaining what they were doing.

"It's unusual for a '73' to be coming to Blairsville, and we all thought that it was landing," Phillips said. "We knew nothing about it, and a lot of people were wondering why it was coming in."

"John Travolta's got a big plane, and everybody said, 'Oh, it's John Travolta coming in.' But it wasn't. Everybody wants to see the movie stars, I guess."

Speaking of movie stars, Firebaugh operated private jets before retiring last year and coming on board as assistant manager at the Blairsville Airport, and he carried more than a few celebrities in his 50-plus years of flying, like Kurt Russell, Bill Murray, Gary Player and others.

Firebaugh said it was neat for Blairsville to have been

again the next day, and several residents headed to the airport and parked at Kings Road and K Creek Road to watch the Boeing's approach.

Incidentally, local pilot W.C. Nelson, after whom the new Terminal Building is named, was at the airport when the plane made its approaches.

He said the Boeing's presence fascinated so many people because "it's the largest plane we've had this close to the ground right here."

In other news, the Blairsville Airport closed March 25 for scheduled runway rejuvenation and is expected to stay closed through April 2.

# Heavy Rain...from Page 1A



**Sonny Dyer's cornfield looked more like a pond next to the Experiment Station after nearly 5 inches of rain on March 25.**  
Photo by Shawn Jarrard

Route 9 in Lumpkin County to intersect US 129 at Turner's Corner. Residents who are familiar with the area may also take Skeenah Gap Road to and from Blairsville.

"The repair was unable to be completed Friday due to the continued wet conditions in the area," GDOT said. "Weather is expected to continue to be an issue in repair efforts throughout the weekend."

Continuing, "The road closure will be in place throughout the weekend and into early next week while restoration of the shoulder takes place. A detour is in place with message boards directing motorists south to State Route 9.

"Motorists are urged to use caution, follow the signed detour route and expect some travel delays."

GDOT has advised people to reduce their speed "while traveling through work zones, stay alert, and watch for signage and workers."

"Before heading out, get real-time information on work status and traffic conditions by calling 511, visiting 511ga.org, or downloading the Georgia 511 app," GDOT said.

Gov. Brian Kemp declared a "State of Emergency for Tornado and Severe Storm Damage" on March 26, which

is the first step in possible reimbursement for damages incurred locally from the storm.

EMA Director Dyer said such declarations allow the state to mobilize support where needed after extreme weather events. And if President Joe Biden declares a federal emergency, the county could qualify for damage reimbursement.

"As far as reimbursement, that would have to go down to a presidential declaration," Dyer said Friday. "All the counties impacted by the storm are

doing damage assessments, probably all weekend – they'll turn that into the governor.

"Then, the governor will evaluate whether federal assistance is needed and will send that to the president. The president will either 'yes' or 'no' declare it, and then that's when they'll probably get very specific about counties and how much damage there was, etc."

Rainy conditions lasted throughout the weekend, though aside from a chance of rain Wednesday, the forecast for the next week looks sunny.



**Fortunately, the flooding from last Thursday's storms didn't get bad enough to put local artist Al Garnto's kinetic fish sculpture underwater in Meeks Park.**  
Photo by Frank Uhle



**The Canoe/Kayak Launch Ramp at Meeks Park II was all but swallowed up by the engorged Nottely River last Thursday.**  
Photo by Frank Uhle