

Skytraxx 5 Review

This my personal opinion of the latest Skytraxx 5, with the popular Skytraxx 2.1 model used for comparison.

First a bit of backstory as I feel it's important to understand where dedicated flight instruments now sit, given the dominance of free flight apps, and whether full, dedicated instruments are still relevant.



What went before?

For years I flew with the excellent Flymaster - whichever model you had, they were quality instruments that did everything, but tended to be slow and clunky to use, especially for tasking. Then, about a decade ago, smartphones began to appear on flightdecks. From around 2012/13 Flyskyhy (iOS) and xctrack (Android) apps came onto the scene and this revolutionised navigation, airspace, combined with superb accompanying mapping. Pre-dating them as a sort of intermediate step were xcsoar/LK8000. In short, despite issues centred on battery life and sunlight visibility, the new apps were way ahead in terms of ease of use, sharing and customisability - but no usable vario (without pairing). But above all it was the high quality mapping that raised the game. No dedicated instrument, even now, can come close, although a few like the Air 3 piggy-back xctrack, but at the expense of bulk and weight. Given where things were going, any manufacturer of fully-fledged flight instruments had an up-hill battle to compete. Naviter and Flymaster tried; still trying, but with limited success and now seem to be switching to a similar approach to the xtracrer ... a smaller, compact vario paired with a phone and integrating FLARM, or trying to raise the level of the maps.



A couple of years back, encouraged by the excellent CAA rebate (no-one should have looked this government gift-horse in the mouth) I sold my Flymaster and looked at the options. Really it boiled down to two ... the xtracrer maxx and the Skytraxx 2.1. Both had excellent reviews, but for me the Skytraxx offered so much more at the same price; in short, full navigation, airspace and what has always been important to me; it was a fully-fledged backup to my phone (I never feel comfortable with all my eggs in one basket). My tendency is to always plug in a route (I can't say I execute many, but I need that focus) and the

Skytraxx provides easy task insertion (in my case as backup) with an igc file having both a g and c stamp (for declared flights).. When I bought the 2.1, I pushed for the c record to be added for the UKXL, within two weeks Skytraxx responded with an update. Brilliant! It's now standard.

My experience of the 2.1 over a number of seasons has been excellent – it's hard to fault. It's been totally reliable, easy to use and is small, light and runs forever - 30hrs/charge. The vario is very responsive, it's simple to customise, add screens to - and I like orange. Name another instrument that comes with a bright orange rubber protective cover. It also had (note the use of had) FANET+ hence EC to qualify for the rebate.

Why switch to the Skytraxx 5?

The initial jolt was on discovering that Skytraxx, like other manufacturers, had problems sourcing components to the extent that all models in the Skytraxx range, from the 2.1 up to and including the 3 and full colour, 4 variants were being discontinued. You can only find



second-hand now and they command a premium. A bit of digging also revealed that whilst they were still providing support, it didn't cover some parts like screens (colour), keypads or odd chips they couldn't get hold of. Hence, the Skytraxx 5 is actually a very different beast in terms of its internal architecture, having a different keyboard and screen. Basically, a full redesign. However, it keeps all the familiar user features, menu structure and layout of the 2.1, but with some extras including full FLARM (as an extra), sharing via BT, wifi, live tracking and the Skysafe filter which looks especially useful if it works? Upgrading to full FLARM means other FLARM users (not just FANET+) appear on the map screen. To avoid clutter, such as with extraneous waypoints/pilots, you can be selective in terms of who/what you choose to make visible.

What do I think of it?

The first noticeable thing is the screen – another big reason I bought it. When you put the 2.1 and the 5 side by side (see top photo) the 5 is larger, sharper and brighter. It's even more obvious in the flesh. It's been slimmed down to a mere 15mm, but weight-wise it's added about 50g to 200gm. Various screen layouts come as defaults, including the Classic 1 from the 2.1, but a new Classic 2 becomes the main start-up screen. You can design as many screen profiles as you need and store them for selection. Within each profile is a nest of screens, all customisable and as many as you wish, but I'd suggested keeping it simple. One change I'm not a fan of, although you rarely need to use it except to set up your pilot/wing profile, is the navigation around the alphanumeric keyboard. Star Wars fans might love it. It's a gyroscopic tilting wonder to move a small dot ... I think I'm pretty good at steady hand games, but I've still to develop the knack of moving that darned dot with precision! The outer case is a sort of hard, non-removal rubber - no orange flip off, with a stick on Velcro back.

Another selling point for me was the vario. The 2.1 is very good, both in terms of responsiveness and having a nice, rising tone. Over the years I played around with the 'tone editor' and came up with several 'Ed' tones, but in the end I couldn't better the default. I did a number of side by side tests and right away it was obvious the 5 is even more responsive



and the sound much cleaner, especially at the end where it matters. At 50% it's more than loud enough ... a few had complained the 2.1 was rather quiet, although I never found that to be the case running it at 80%.volume I would say the vario is the equal of the xtracer. which means about as good as it gets.

A small addition, not found on the 2.1, is the 'double tap' that can be set to go back or forwards through the screens. Whether I'd use it is another matter.

The same four keyboard button are retained, although slightly larger and raised – presumably for gloved hands. I actually found the 2.1 keyboard quicker and the 5 requires a more definite push and the scroll speed is slightly slower.

A few small changes - the hike mode is now subsumed into the main flight logging directory, previously it was separate and a pain if you were into hike and fly. I spent many xDales hours stitching them together! Now it appears to know whether you're hiking, resting or flying – apparently. Also worth noting is the Skytraxx 5 now accepts both .wpt and gpx formats. The 2.1 was only gpx.

These are my initial impressions. I've yet to get any flying weather to try it out, but overall I'm really glad I took the opportunity to upgrade. As far as I know there are no dealers in the UK ... post Brexit wrecks margins. You'll need to go direct and that can bring its own wallet pain (14 euro to ship in the EU, more to the UK + duty). Set against that the rebate is still available until 31st March, but the window is closing fast. Like a number of manufacturers there is also a subscription element ... Burnair is 39 euro/year although that can be reduced to 20 euro if you opt for a longer period. There is a good *online manual that explains the Burnair benefits, but I don't see it's worth it to have live weather, instant flight uploads to X Contest, live tracking and updating etc. It comes with a sim card inside and the first three months are free so you can try before you decide. However, I will possibly upgrade to full FLARM for a one-off 79 euro. * The online manual is very comprehensive and clear, the small booklet it comes with covers the basics – but still about all you need. If you've had a previous Skytraxx almost everything about the S5 is familiar.

In my opinion the Skytraxx 5 is very worth considering. At the end of the day you pay your money and This, in my view, is one of the best value, fully dedicated flight instruments available at present and in a slim, lightweight package. Whether you want to pair with your phone, use it as a backup, or as a standalone, it'll do everything that pesky app will do - minus the mapping, but with five times the battery life (30hrs).

Please be aware these are first impressions, I cannot vouch for totally technical accuracy.

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Feb' 2024

