Volunteer pilots spot two potentially dangerous wildfires in just one week during UK heatwave

Tuesday 21 July, 2026

As prolonged hot, dry weather continues to increase the risk of wildfires across the UK, volunteer pilots from Civil Air Support are helping emergency services by providing an unexpected but valuable early warning capability from the air.

Whilst the majority of Civil Air Support's missions are planned in response to requests from partner organisations and members of the public, the charity's pilots are also encouraged to remain vigilant during routine flights for anything that could pose a risk to people, wildlife or the environment.

That vigilance has already proved its worth during the current heatwave.

On two separate occasions in the past week - one in Hampshire and another in Cornwall -Civil Air Support pilots identified suspicious fires burning in remote rural locations. From a safe distance, the pilots observed the incidents, captured photographs to assist responders and immediately reported their observations to Air Traffic Control. The information was then passed directly to the relevant Fire and Rescue Service, enabling firefighters to respond rapidly.

With vegetation exceptionally dry, even seemingly minor ignition sources such as discarded cigarettes, disposable barbecues or fireworks can quickly develop into significant wildfires. In remote woodland, heathland and moorland, fires may remain undetected for some time, allowing them to spread rapidly before they are reported.

Early intervention is critical. The sooner firefighters are alerted, the greater the opportunity to contain a fire before it threatens homes, infrastructure, wildlife and valuable natural habitats, whilst reducing the substantial resources required to tackle large-scale incidents.

Civil Air Support currently has around 120 active volunteer pilots and aircraft across the UK. Supported by a central coordination team and established operating procedures, the charity is able to ensure that observations are made safely, responsibly and consistently, with information passed quickly through the appropriate channels.

"We're not replacing the emergency services," said a Civil Air Support spokesperson. "Our role is simply to be another pair of eyes in the sky. When our pilots happen to spot something unusual during a flight, they know exactly how to report it through the proper channels. If that helps firefighters arrive even a few minutes earlier, it can make a significant difference to the outcome."

The charity stresses that its pilots never investigate incidents at low level or interfere with emergency operations. Any observations are made whilst conducting normal flights, maintaining safe separation from the incident and complying fully with Civil Aviation Authority regulations and Air Traffic Control instructions.

As extreme weather events become more frequent, Civil Air Support believes that responsible aerial observation can play an increasingly important role in protecting communities, wildlife and the countryside.

Anyone who spots signs of a wildfire should report it immediately by calling 999 and asking for the Fire and Rescue Service. Members of the public are also urged to avoid lighting fires or disposable barbecues in the countryside and to dispose of cigarettes responsibly, particularly during periods of prolonged dry weather

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