

James A Wilson

My account of the RAX399 flight on Thursday, February 18th

[REDACTED]
White Lake, MI 48386

This leg of this trip was RSW - JVY. It was agreed that the co-pilot would be the pilot flying the aircraft as we were not carrying any passengers and the weather was favorable. All normal procedures were followed and the takeoff, climb and enroute portion of the flight was uneventful. On descent all normal procedures were adhered to. Both of us pilots were fully aware that runway 14 - 32 was closed. On descent the approach was briefed per the checklist and normal procedures and checklists were complete. The weather reported at JVY was good VFR with around 5000 ft overcast, 10 miles visibility, and light winds out of the north. We were approaching JVY from the southeast and we briefed to set up for the ILS approach to runway 18 which is 7000', and we expected to break out visually before initiating the approach, and maneuver for a visual to RWY 36, with more favorable winds. Upon breaking out at around 5000 MSL, at night at approximately 1900 local time, I called unicom trying to get an airport advisory, and to have the runway lights for RWY 36 fully bright; but received no answer. I then clicked the mic on CTAF 5 times for the pilot-controlled lighting. A few seconds later the co-pilot saw the runway and pointed it out to me. At that moment we believed that RWY 36 lights had been illuminated by the pilot-controlled lighting system, as RWY 32 is documented as not having pilot-controlled lighting. I then notified approach that we had the airport in sight at our 10 o'clock position and we were then cleared for the visual approach. The co-pilot began the final descent and maneuvered visually to the runway that we saw illuminated, which turned out to be runway 32, not runway 36. I then asked approach control if he observed any traffic between us and the airport. The controller replied that there was no observed traffic. I then cancelled our IFR and adjusted the transponder to squawk 1200. Meanwhile the co-pilot flying was navigating and maneuvering visually towards the runway that we believed to be 36. I was assisting the co-pilot to stabilize the approach and configured the aircraft to land. The before landing checklist was completed and we were stabilized and ready to land prior to 500' agl. The only runway lights observed during the entire approach and landing was the runway that was directly in front of us. The length of the runway appeared to be as expected due to the 75 ft. width and night conditions which gave the illusion of a longer runway. This was a pure visual approach to RWY 36 as no instrument approaches exist for RWY 36. The lights and runway were such that we had no visual indication that the runway that we were lined up for was closed i.e. illuminated "X" or other markings. Upon touchdown, we deployed reverse thrust and braking. It became clear to me that we had inadvertently landed on runway 32, but then very quickly hit the plowed snow berm at the intersection of RWY 36 and RWY 32. The force of the snow berm impact folded back the nose gear and sheared off the main landing gear. We steered the aircraft with the rudder keeping it centered on the runway. As we slid off the end of the runway at a relatively slow speed, I shut down the engines and came to rest about 150 ft off the end of runway 32. We ensured that everything was shut down properly and then exited the aircraft unharmed. Once at the FBO, the airport manager was called. He came out and was very helpful. I did ask him why the closed runway was illuminated. His answer was that they did that for greater illumination of the airport. The next day when our Chief Pilot arrived, he asked the same question. This time the answer was that they were going to plow runway 32, so they turned on the lights, but the person driving the plow decided to go home for dinner and was going to come back. But he left the lights on for RWY 32.

Fortunately, the only injury was to my pride. This was the first time that I have ever even scratched an aircraft in over 50 years of safe flying. The aircraft seems to be in fairly good shape, and I am hearing that it will be repaired, which makes me feel a little better. This accident could have been avoided if we had verified that the DG heading was aligned with the intended runway. Configuring for the approach and focusing on a visual to an unfamiliar airport, at night, and seeing only one runway lit, while knowing only one runway was open, may have contributed to dropping our guard in verifying the intended runway. In the future, I can assure that I will always make it a priority to verify the intended runway, no matter the circumstances involved. Please feel free to contact me with any questions you might have.

Sincerely,

[REDACTED]
James A. Wilson