



**JEFF SKILES**

COMMENTARY / CONTRAILS



*A backcountry strip at Soldier Bar, Idaho.*

# Bush Flying in Wisconsin

One EAA member's unusual reason to fly

BY JEFF SKILES

**I ENJOY JUST ABOUT** any kind of flying and have been fortunate to fly aircraft ranging from ultralights to large airliners. As a flight instructor I am able to pass on some of what I have learned over the years as well. I do like to teach, but mostly I just like to be in the air looking at the farm fields going by. Whether I am flying the aircraft myself or talking a student through the finer points of a steep turn doesn't really matter to me; I enjoy it all the same.

Sometimes, though, we all need a reason to fly, a little extra impetus to get up in the air. Life gets in the way. Work and responsibility keeps us tethered to the ground. I'm much more likely to go flying with a student on a warm summer's eve than go up and fly myself. Instructing gives me a purpose for flight. Practical guys like me need a reason for action.

EAA chapters long ago perfected the pancake breakfast as a reason to draw people into the air. On most any warm-weather Saturday here in the Midwest pancakes can be found within an hour's flight, north, south, east, or west. Eight dollars is the going rate for breakfast in this part of the country—don't even think about charging \$9.

In Wisconsin this last summer several FBOs joined together to promote a once a month luncheon fly-out. It's an excuse to get in your airplane and flock together with other like-minded aviators and

it has proven to be amazingly successful. Pilots fly from far and wide to join together for an hour of camaraderie and then return from whence they came.

Only a short 30-minute flight from Oshkosh is the small hamlet of Iola, Wisconsin. The airport consists of several grass runways, a couple of hangars, and the large clubhouse of the Central County Flyers Association. Every Friday year-round a hundred or more pilots fly and drive to share lunch and fellowship at one of the warmest little airports around. You must buy a membership to dine, but lifetime family memberships are freely sold for \$10 apiece.

Every year there is a fish boil on Washington Island, a roughly 10-square-mile island that is part of a beautiful archipelago stretching out into Lake Michigan. The last gathering was the 60th anniversary of the Washington Island

Lions Club's Fly-In Whitefish Boil. A hundred airplanes descend onto this quaint little island for of all things, boiled fish. Hot dogs are provided for those not partial to aquatic fare along with crafts, hayrides, music, and of course, bingo.

On your way to Washington Island you fly right over the inviting airport of Ephraim in Door County. The airport has bikes available for use by aerial visitors to pedal down the hill to Wilson's for ice cream or a burger. The view across the waters of Green Bay from your table is an experience to be remembered.

It seems as if food is a powerful motivator for flight, as any pilot who has paid for that \$100 hamburger can attest. But, there are a very few who have developed their own unique reasons for getting into the air, which brings me to my vet—as in veterinarian.

I have always known that my vet was a pilot, but our infrequent connection over the

examining table has always been centered on whatever mysterious malady my collie has managed to evidence lately. With such singular canine concentration, somehow talk of flying never came up.

But recently an uncaptioned photo turned up in my e-mail. It showed a Cessna 170 parked next to an Aviat Husky in a high mountain meadow somewhere close to paradise. A curving scratch of a runway/road/cart track extended beyond the two aircraft down a narrow valley with walls seemingly thousands of feet high. A more idyllic setting couldn't be imagined.

"Is that yours?" I instantly e-mailed back.

"Yes, just got back from Idaho. Would you like to go flying sometime?" was the response, and that weekend I was treated to a most unlikely kind of aviation experience.

Jim Stevenson, EAA 1087325, has been flying for four years and owns a Cessna 170B sitting high on 29-inch Alaskan Bushwheels.

His plane has an aftermarket 180-hp engine with a constant-speed propeller, and a more beautiful looking ship, inside and out, couldn't be imagined. But what is more amazing is what he does with it.

Jim and a group of friends fly the bush...in Wisconsin. Their group consists of the aforementioned Cessna 170, a Cessna 180, a Maule, a Husky, and a Super Cub. One or another of the group has received permission to land at a series of farm strips and ultralight runways across the rolling hills of southern Wisconsin. They fly in a group and sandwich their ships into postage-stamp-sized runways for practice and fun.

Sunday morning dawns clear and beautiful after the rains of the day before. I hadn't flown out of Morey Field on the west side of Madison, Wisconsin, since I was a kid. My memory of ramshackle buildings by a narrow strip of asphalt had



2014

**LANCAIR** LEGACY

- ★ **NEW PRICING!**
- ★ **NEW FEATURES!**
- ★ **NEW PANEL!**

**Economy Cruiser**

[www.lancair.com](http://www.lancair.com)

541.923.2244



Jim Stevenson's and Jeff Collins' Cessnas at AirVenture Oshkosh 2013.

transformed itself into a modern airport with a substantial concrete ramp and rows of very nice-looking hangars.

As we push the 170 from the shadows of the hangar out into the sun the somewhat whimsical paint scheme and huge tires combine to give an almost cartoonish look to the plane. We climb up into the front seats, not an easy feat on those big tires, start up, and head for the grass runway. Jim begins to speak what I have come to find out is the language of this small fraternity. Talk of leading edge cuffs, vortex generators, and angle of attack indicators fills the air. I don't really understand much of it, or why it is important, but the 170 sure gets off the ground fast.

The morning is one to remember as the landscape below slowly transforms itself from the dusty heat of yesterday's summer to the not long off chill of a Wisconsin winter. The reds and yellows of the turning leaves are beautifully framed against the greens and browns of the farm fields. Here in the northern Midwest we have abundant opportunity to experience the transition from the dog days to a landscape on fire with color, and yet every year we marvel at its return.

We circle over a grass strip atop a nearby ridge with a lonely high-wing Cessna parked alongside. Jeff Collins, EAA 1119970, waits by his 180 that sits on even bigger tires and is equally bedecked with modifications that I can't comprehend. We shortly depart with the 180 in trail.

Jim has a round robin course mapped out on his iPad. iPads are still a mystery to me. I don't own one myself, and I realize that I'm probably the last pilot on the planet not to, but I find something incongruous about having an electronic course on a moving map to find backcountry landing sites in the rolling Wisconsin hills.

"There's our first strip down there," Jim says as he points toward the ground.

"Where? There?" I'm a bit perplexed.

I think I see where Jim is casually gesturing. It looks more like a grassy farm path to me. I wouldn't say it quite measures up to the term "runway." It is set down in a valley sandwiched between two low ridges. I suppose it's long enough, but who knows. At the end of the runway is a hill that will have to be maneuvered around on takeoff. Jim enters a pattern for this small oblong of grass.

A road at the end will need to be carefully watched for traffic because the runway starts right at the shoulder. Thankfully no cars are in view as Jim drags it in just over the road. A slight flare, the wheels touch, and forward pressure pins the big tires to the grass. We're down and stopped with plenty of room to spare. As we clear the runway Jeff's 180 comes in behind.

Jim and Jeff compare notes over the radio about the freakish winds on short final before we're off to the next spot. It's obvious that Jim is very skilled at flying this 170. Most of his 400 hours have been training like this trying to fit his plane into

smaller and smaller places. An hour of Jim's flying is probably worth a hundred sitting at altitude cruising along like the rest of us.

The next spot is about 15 miles away and looks as if it's not much more than 1,000 feet long. It also slopes quite dramatically from left to right, a bit alarming on short final but once again it proves to be no problem for Jim.

Many small farm strips are challenging in this part of Wisconsin. This is the driftless area, an area of deeply carved valleys untouched by the last glacial age. Landowners have created runways with difficulties known only to them.

We circle over one that doesn't look too bad from the air, but on short approach it is clear that the ends are the high points with a serious dip in the center. We get the wheels rolling right where the short-cropped grass begins, and before it slopes downhill. Once again, with Jim at the wheel, the strip proves to be a challenge but not a problem.

Our last landing before returning to the familiar environs of a modern airport is a very short but uphill patch of grass. Jim sets it on the end, and the slope brings us quickly to a stop on what would otherwise appear to be an unusable landing site.

Jim and Jeff have found a truly unique reason that gets them in the air most every Friday afternoon. Sometimes the group is even larger as they travel in loose formation from one field to the next like motorcycle riders on the open road.

We all sometimes need that reason to put aside our daily lives and head for the airport; find yours today and go flying.

*Groups like the Recreational Aviation Foundation, Utah Back Country Pilots Association, and Idaho Aviation Association have a mission to preserve backcountry strips in the West. Their websites are rich with information on strips like that mountain meadow at Soldier Bar, Idaho, that started all of this. The best part is that many can be used by any kind of aircraft. Get a little mountain flying instruction and go give it a try! EAA*

**Jeff Skiles**, EAA 336120, is EAA vice president of communities and member programs. Contact Jeff at [jskiles@eaa.org](mailto:jskiles@eaa.org).