

A YOUNG



BY JEFF SKILES

JOURNEY

SHARING THE SPIRIT OF AVIATION FROM OSHKOSH TO LAKELAND





Samuel Reed tries out the controls of the Cessna Skycatcher in Columbia, South Carolina.

Low and slow across America's heartland, no radio, no calendar, no commitments, nothing but discovery ahead and an entire world of possibilities beneath the wings.

Recently I got lost, once again, in the passages of Rinker Buck's coming of age reminiscence, *Flight of Passage*—a story about him and his brother flying a Piper Cub from New Jersey to California in 1966. I remember thinking how exotic such a trip sounded, particularly since, as a pilot, I have never been more than a couple of hundred miles away from my home in a small aircraft. Low and slow across America's heartland, no radio, no calendar, no commitments, nothing but discovery ahead and an entire world of possibilities beneath the wings.

My soul yearned for such a flight of personal exploration, a sort of aeronautical quest for my own identity, my very own flight of passage. Then, one day, desire and opportunity became one.

The EAA Skycatcher Tour began as such: one man and one airplane, with the breadth of America before us. This was a kind of journey of perception for the two of us, the Skycatcher and me.

Reality, however, is never quite so profound. I have to admit, I wasn't feeling too philosophical as my head bounced off the ceiling for the third time. The air aloft was roiling like waves hitting shore as we skirted around Rockford, Illinois. The contrary winds seemed to have been privy to my flight planning, and they were now laughing at my naïveté. The little GPS-inspired wind indicator on the Skycatcher's primary flight display was pointed straight toward me. Forty knots on the nose. The wings of this little ship bucked and twisted in the turbulence. It was a flat-out blow, and I was headed directly into the maw of the beast.

This wasn't what I had planned when EAA suggested I fly its Skycatcher from Oshkosh to Lakeland, Florida, for the Sun 'n Fun International Expo and Fly-In. I had imagined clear skies and tail winds as we all do when confined to our own thoughts. In anticipation of the journey, I bought a large supply of sectional charts, and marked off the courses and distances just like I remember doing as a student pilot. Watching my crisp black lines leapfrog across the charts seemed to add an air of solid purpose to the enterprise. I even found my E6-B flight computer in a box in the basement, but I had forgotten how to use it with the passage of the years.

My Skycatcher checkout with Kevin Loppnow never covered these kinds of conditions. No criticism of Kevin—it was a pristine, sunny, and calm day when we flew. He patiently led me through my light-sport aircraft (LSA) familiarization. My checkout with Kevin made me aware of the many differences between LSA and the larger aircraft I'm more familiar with. LSA have suffered

A Youthful Journey

from a rather high rate of accidents since their introduction. Even with my 21,000 flying hours, a checkout with an experienced LSA instructor was a welcome and necessary introduction to these small aircraft. I have no desire to add a footnote to the FAA's LSA accident statistics.

Today, it seemed I was just out of the starting gate and already this trip was going south in more ways than one. I was headed for St. Charles, Missouri, which is not exactly on a straight line between Oshkosh and Lakeland, but could be viewed as more or less along the way. Most importantly,

below was not rocketing beneath the Skycatcher's wings, it was advancing purposefully toward our destination.

I find myself referring to the Skycatcher and I as "we." It is such an agreeable little airplane that I view our journey as a shared experience. After all, I cannot take flight without the Skycatcher, and the Skycatcher cannot do so without me. Only together can we leave our terrestrial confines and soar among the clouds. Still, for my part of this partnership, a very tired pilot watched as the Missouri River slowly crawled over the horizon.

ST. CHARLES

St. Charles is an idyllic little airport right on the shore of the Missouri River north of St. Louis. Here EAA Chapter 32 maintains a strong membership under the watchful eye of the Doherty clan, Dave, Bill, and Don who serve as president, vice-president, and treasurer, respectively. In the warm months they hold three events a month, a chapter meeting, a Young Eagles rally, and a movie/popcorn night to keep the families involved. I like the idea of the movie/popcorn night.

Chapter 32 draws its Young Eagles heavily from the Boy and Girl Scouting organizations in the St. Louis area. Bill Jagust, its Young Eagles coordinator, puts on a program to complete the Boy Scout Aviation Merit Badge and Girl Scout Junior Aerospace Badge at 9 a.m., rain or shine. The merit badge recruitment approach led to a healthy stream of Young Eagles being taken aloft by members of the chapter. The scouting organizations are a fantastic source for the Young Eagles program.

EAA President Rod Hightower showed up in his Stearman for the occasion. Hot dogs and hamburgers kept the crowds happy while the kids waited for their flights. The food didn't hurt the demeanor of the chapter volunteers any either.

Soon, though, with the day winding down and the winds picking up, the Skycatcher and I, now with a video chase plane in trail, departed for our next rally in

Lebanon, Tennessee. This was a race between Cessna 162 and 172, and one that I was determined to win. On this leg I was able to take advantage of the Skycatcher's speed and altitude capabilities by climbing up to 9,500 feet to catch a tail wind. The Cessna was still climbing strong even up at this altitude. I knew the 172 would be mushing along with the nose in a climb attitude and the throttle firewalled, that is, if it ever made it to 9,500 feet at all. The Skycatcher, however, wasn't even breathing hard in the rarified air, and the altitude netted a 135-knot groundspeed.

Illinois gave way to Kentucky as the verdant green of spring stretched to the horizon. The air was cool with a seemingly limitless view from horizon to horizon. The afternoon was mesmerizing. It seemed as if we were hanging from the sky, stationary, while the earth slowly rotated below us. Too soon we had to begin our descent as the hills of Tennessee came into view.

Lebanon, Tennessee, turned out to be a pretty little bedroom community for Nashville. I rounded the pattern after my 2-1/2 hour flight not seeing any evidence of the Cessna 172 chase plane. A beautiful night led to a nice landing, and I taxied over to the hangar of Randy Hooper, corporate pilot and EAA Chapter 863 president. We waited a half-hour for the chase plane—living up to its name—to finally arrive. As I've said, the Skycatcher is fast.

LEBANON

The next day dawned sunny and pleasant as the ramp boss, one self-named "Bigfoot," laid out the orders of the day. Chapter 863 has a different plan for Young Eagles recruitment.



Bill Jagust, an airline pilot and EAA chapter member, conducts a ground school during the Young Eagles rally in St. Charles. Many of the kids present were going for their Aviation Merit Badge.

plane and pilot were expected at a Young Eagles rally come dawn.

Were I in Rinker's Cub I'd be on the ground right now looking into a rental car, but today, even with the torment Mother Nature had thrown in our path, the successful completion of the mission was assured. Fortunately, the Skycatcher has the capabilities of a much more powerful airplane. Under the cowl is the same O-200 powerplant as the Cessna 150, but the Skycatcher is 300 pounds lighter, yielding impressive performance. More to the point, at the moment, even in that blow, the Skycatcher's normal cruise speed of 115-120 knots true airspeed had only been reduced to a still acceptable 80-knot groundspeed. A Cub would be going backward. While the earth





EAA Chapter 288 President Alan Norris shows Garrett Cushman, 8, his Varga Kachina during the rally in New Smyrna Beach.

It contacts the Boys and Girls clubs and gives underprivileged kids, who otherwise would have no other access, the ability to experience flight. Here, more than at any other Young Eagles rally I have attended, the kids I flew were getting their first flight in any airplane large or small.

As in St. Charles, the lure of hot dogs proved irresistible to the Young Eagles candidates. The grill never cooled as the kids were carried aloft by the 10 Young Eagles pilots present. By afternoon, the stream of Young Eagles turned to a trickle, the last of the hot dogs were being shunted around the grill to keep them from burning, and it became time for us to think about moving on.

COLUMBIA

Once again this traveling show took to the skies for our next stop: Jim Hamilton L.B. Owens Airport near Columbia, South Carolina, and EAA Chapter 242. The flight there would be more of a challenge, because I had now picked up a Cessna 180 for a chase plane. Up to 9,500 feet again, where an even more substantial tail wind pushed us at 160 knots over the ground. An impressive show, but I couldn't compete with raw horsepower. I saw the 180 go by as we crossed the Smoky Mountains.

EAA 242 proudly boasts of having flown 8,872 Young Eagles, to date. The current leadership of Tom Roberts as chapter president and Ron Shelton, Young Eagles coordinator, continues the chapter tradition. They have Young Eagles rallies scheduled 12 months of the year.

At this day's rally, the ramp was graced with the presence of a B-25 that was fished out of the big lake across town. The Columbia Composite Squadron of the Civil Air Patrol stood watch over the relic of a training accident long past. This B-25 spent 39 years underwater. The ravages of water and time have made sure it would never take to the skies again, but it did make a stunning backdrop to the rally. The kids kept coming in a steady flow, and I was able to fly five



YOU CAN FLY YOUNG EAGLES, TOO!

Since EAA's Young Eagles program was launched in 1992, more than 42,000 pilots have introduced more than 1.6 million young people to the world of flight.

All EAA members with a current sport pilot or higher certificate are eligible to provide Young Eagles flights to youth ages 8-17, and you can do the flights individually or as part of a rally.

Speaking of rallies, a worldwide rally of sorts will take place on June 11, 2011, as we celebrate International Young Eagles Day—a day set aside solely for the purpose of getting young people in a small airplane to experience the thrill of general aviation.

For more details on becoming a Young Eagles pilot and how you can participate in International Young Eagles Day, visit www.YoungEagles.org.

A Youthful Journey

or six Young Eagles before it, once again, was necessary to fuel up and move on.

With nasty weather approaching, a three-hour flight to Spruce Creek, Florida, in the offing, and stiff competition from the Cessna 180 for the race to the finish line, I did the only thing I knew how to do: I cheated. As soon as burgers were served for lunch, I sprinted to the Skycatcher and took off for Florida. Knowing that my companions wouldn't spurn a free meal, I counted on a 20-minute head start over the chase plane, maybe more.



Jeff talks to a group of kids at the Lebanon Municipal Airport before giving flights.

NEW SMYRNA BEACH

The flight down the Atlantic coast required us to fly the narrow corridor that is left between all the prohibited areas, restricted areas, and military operations areas. The flying was rough and turbulent in the Florida heat, and we drew a stiff head wind to boot.

Coastal marshland was under the wings for the most part on this leg of the journey. I wondered exactly how I might successfully complete a forced landing in a swamp. I didn't doubt the success of the operation, but would anyone care enough to try finding me in such an endless desert of sameness? This wasn't the low and slow face of America I had imagined from Rinker's prose. My enthusiasm for the mission was diminishing rapidly when I encountered a new hazard in my trek across America.

Birds!

Obviously, I am no stranger to birds, but I have more reason than most to regret my

associations with them. In the many flights I would subsequently make in Florida, there was only one where I didn't have to deviate around a bird. Even on that one flight, I was only safe because the weather was so bad that any self-respecting bird was on the ground. We're not talking songbirds here, but big vultures and egrets soaring in thermals 3,000 feet in the air. In a collision between the diminutive Skycatcher and one of these Florida pterodactyls, the bird would almost certainly come out the winner.

With my eyes scanning the horizon and my nerves rattled, I

landed at Spruce Creek, where my wretchedness was only compounded by the sight of the 180 parked, tied down, no life around it, as if it had been there for years. Surely this is just a Cessna 180 with a similar paint job, a look-alike. It couldn't be Adam's 180...but it was.

President Alan Norris arranged to hold EAA Chapter 288's rally at nearby New Smyrna Beach airport. This was not your average Young

Eagles rally. Spruce Creek is a vibrant flying community and home to many exotic aircraft. Twenty aircraft and pilots participated. The flight line had several SX-300s, a Waco UPF-7, and even a Johnson Rocket. I wanted to be a Young Eagle for a day myself.

This was a special Young Eagles rally for me. One of the passengers from the Miracle on the Hudson flight, Casey Jones, stopped in with his wife and son. I, of course, flew his son, and I set up Casey for a ride in an SX-300. Casey's wife even got a ride in the Rocket. I am forever in wonder at the connection the passengers and crew of 1549 share. It's as if our small group of people has been to a place where no one else has had the privilege to journey, and we have been blessed to return and share it with the rest of humanity. Both Casey and I agreed that if we had that day to live over again, we wouldn't change a thing. We would walk right onto that airplane, take our seats, and know that moment in time was somehow a part of our destiny.

SATISFACTION

The next morning we set off for the short one-hour flight to Lakeland for Sun 'n Fun, and here my journey of discovery would end. Due to thunderstorms and fog, we got there a day and a half later—this was the only real weather we encountered on the entire 1,000-mile trip.

During the tour somewhere in the neighborhood of 500 Young Eagles were flown, giving many children their first introduction to aviation, and the many chapter volunteers the satisfaction of sharing our unusual gift. I wonder if the Young Eagles realize how much they are a part of completing the circle in our own personal journeys.

As for my companion, the Cessna Skycatcher, it proved itself a comfortable partner for this long flight. While it was designed for flight training, it has the speed to act as a capable cross-country machine as well.

The Cessna 162 is this year's EAA Share the Spirit Sweepstakes airplane. The sale of sweepstakes tickets raises money for EAA's youth education programs, and the Cessna 162 will be given to one lucky winner after Oshkosh.

My journey of discovery, like all journeys, was now at an end. I think all journeys, like life itself, are enhanced by the bookends of time. Rinker's America of 1966 probably looked very much like my America 45 years later. The view from a couple thousand feet has a way of harmonizing the works of people and the landscape below. Rinker's thoughts were the musings of a 50-year-old man about an adventure of his youth in an airplane built long before he was born.

Mine was the youthful journey of a gray-ing aviator and the future of this passion we all share. Perhaps one day, long after I've closed my logbook for the final time, one of those kids I flew will embark on their own flight of discovery and remember how it all began. *EAA*

 **Jeff Skiles**, EAA 366120, has been a pilot for 34 years and has almost 21,000 hours logged. He owns and flies a 1935 Waco YOC Cabin biplane that he keeps in Brodhead, Wisconsin. Jeff is EAA Young Eagles co-chairman and was first officer on US Airways Flight 1549, The Miracle on the Hudson. To see more photos and videos from Jeff's Skycatcher tour visit www.SportAviation.org. For more information on the 2011 Share the Spirit Sweepstakes visit www.WinAPlane.com.