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Planes go by air or by sea

Water bird pilots bring the freedom of their aircraft to EAA

By **RICK BARRETT**
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Posted: July 26, 2007

Oshkosh - On a backwater Lake Winnebago harbor, an eclectic mix of seaplanes bob lazily in the placid water.

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2007 MDX

They're part of EAA AirVenture, the experimental aircraft show that continues through Sunday. Many of the seaplanes are from Wisconsin and the Upper Midwest, where they've grown in popularity and have created business opportunities.

Baumann Floats LLC of New Richmond started making seaplane pontoons in the Twin Cities in 1989 and has since moved to northern Wisconsin. The company has a 4,000-foot asphalt landing strip, a 2,300-foot grass strip and a small lake for seaplanes - sometimes called water birds.

"We put planes in the water and off they go," said Joe Birkemeyer, company general manager.

It's difficult to estimate the number of seaplanes in Wisconsin, since many of them are amphibious - meaning they can take off and land on both water and conventional air strips.

Baumann Floats installs pontoons on conventional planes from as far as the West Coast. Another Wisconsin company, in Wausau, also makes aircraft pontoons.

Wipaire Inc., which claims to be the world's largest manufacturer of airplane floats, is based in South St. Paul, Minn.


Combined, Wisconsin and Minnesota are one of the most popular seaplane regions in the United States, according to pilots.

Some of the allure stems from thousands of small lakes in the North Woods and being able to access places that otherwise are difficult to reach.

"I actually describe my plane as a magic carpet. It will take you from the airport to do lake hopping and anything else," said Paul Seehafer, a seaplane pilot from Junction City and chairman of the AirVenture seaplane base south of Oshkosh.

Technology improvements have resulted in seaplanes that are lighter, stronger and more versatile. Some planes, especially those with folding wings, can be hauled out of the water on a trailer pulled

EAA



Photo/Mark Hoffman

Joe Birkemeyer walks on a cable across his 1959 Cessna 175 on Wednesday at the Experimental Aircraft Association's seaplane base on Lake Winnebago south of Oshkosh. Birkemeyer is general manager of New Richmond-based Baumann Floats LLC.

If You Go

- **What:** EAA AirVenture Oshkosh 2007
- **When:** Monday through July 29. Gates open at 7 a.m. each day. Exhibit buildings open daily from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m.
- **How much:** Daily rates for non-EAA members are \$33 for adults, \$19 for children 14-18; \$14 for children 6-13 and free for children 5 and under. Parking is \$7.
- **For more information:** Visit www.airventure.org

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"You can buy a more capable seaplane for less money," Seehafer said. "And it's a true escape machine. I live in central Wisconsin, but I can be in the wilderness in about an hour. I can camp on islands, which is something I couldn't do with a conventional airplane."

Small lakes with calm water attract seaplanes like a magnet. The Wausau airport created a seaplane base, on Lake Wausau, with help from a \$600,000 state grant.

Savior or nuisance?

Seaplanes have been involved in rescue operations, but they've also been called a nuisance on lakes where people have complained about noise and interference with boat traffic.

Seaplanes are banned or restricted on more than 80 Wisconsin lakes, according to the state Department of Transportation. In Minocqua, near Rhinelander, town officials passed an ordinance that clipped the wings of a commercial seaplane operation that was making several thousand dollars a day giving rides.

New Jersey bans seaplanes from public lakes, as do Orlando and Winter Park in central Florida.

"On busy lakes, boaters and float planes generally don't get along real good," said Brian Schanche, owner of Adventure Seaplanes in Blaine, Minn.

Some of the new planes have quieter engines and can take off and land in short distances.

"Making less noise is a huge plus," Seehafer said. "Everybody loves to watch a seaplane fly by once, but pretty soon they get a little irritated if planes are flying over their house all afternoon."

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At the AirVenture seaplane base, dozens of planes take off and land on Lake Winnebago during the week. Most are small, conventional aircraft, but some are hulking military machines and antiques.

The pilots have come from across the country, some of them "lake hopping" their way to Wisconsin on less-traveled flight paths.

It's not for everyone, especially if you are used to predictable asphalt runways, radio control towers and wind socks for help.

"If you like being told what to do, taking off and landing, you might not like a seaplane because you are on your own. You have to fly down and 'read' the water conditions before you land. It's more challenging," Seehafer said.

But seaplanes provide some measure of security because they can land on thousands of Wisconsin's lakes and, if the water is calm enough, Lake Michigan and Lake Superior.

Caught in a storm last summer, Seehafer landed safely on a lake and tethered his plane to a lifeguard station. He waited out the storm in a beach shelter.

"I didn't need an airport. I actually tried to pick a lake with a restaurant on it, but the weather closed in too fast," he said.

During AirVenture, a shuttle bus operates every day to the seaplane base. The shuttle pickup point is south of the antique classic area, in the amphibious-plane parking area. Also, there are boat tours of the seaplane harbor.

The seaplane base, set up only during AirVenture, is a laid-back, quiet destination in contrast to the much larger, busier EAA event.

The base has its own campground. Spectators can walk up close to the planes tethered to boat docks and talk with the pilots.

"It's been described as a yoga class in the middle of a rock concert," Seehafer said.