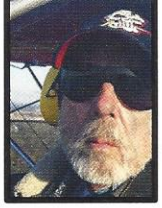
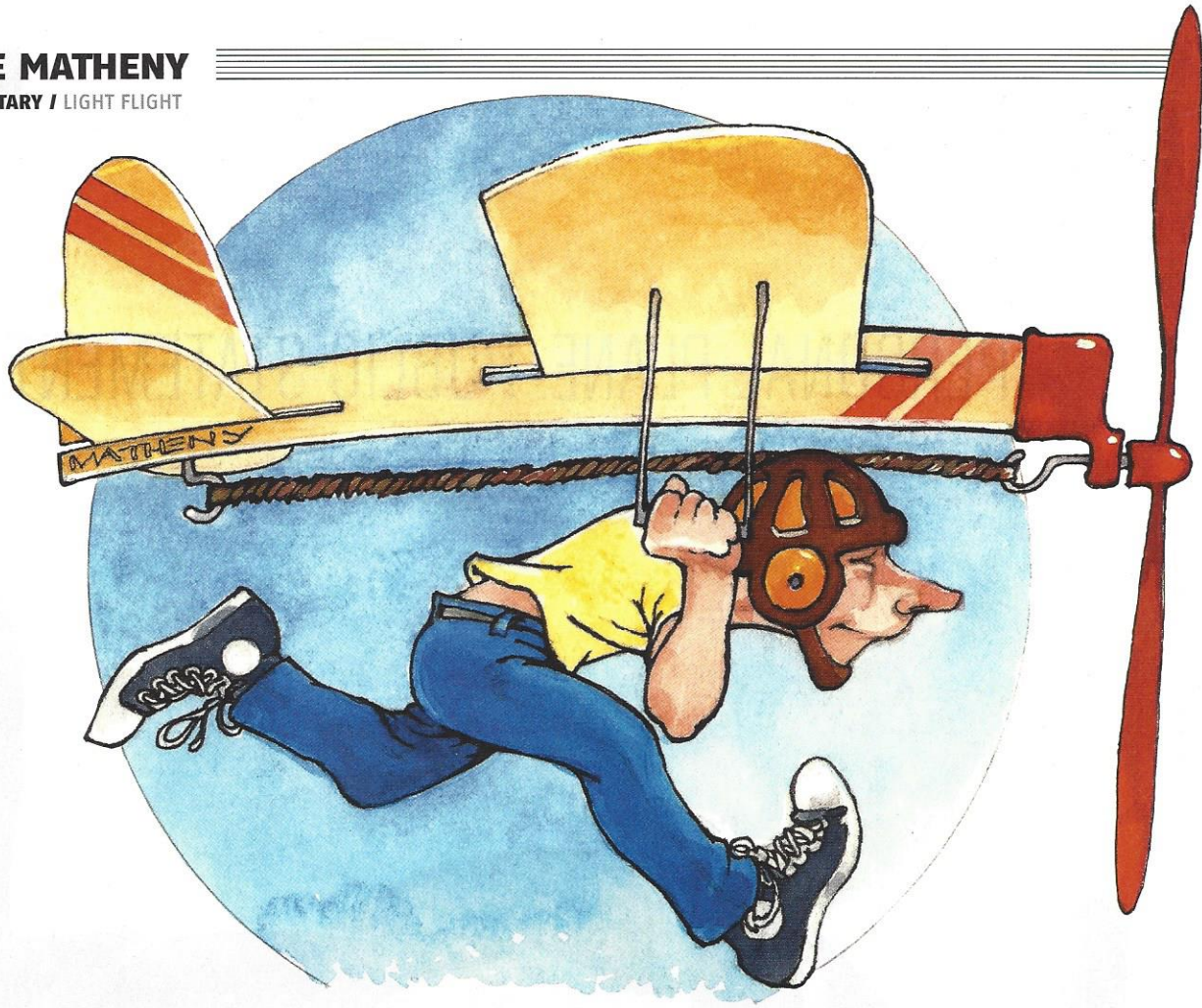


DAVE MATHENY
COMMENTARY / LIGHT FLIGHT



Who *Are* These Guys?

The people who fly ultralights and LSA

SOME PEOPLE WILL DO anything to get off the ground.

They will put engines on their backs and run along under parachutes, hang engines on hang gliders, build spidery-looking contrivances that approximate airplanes, or do just about anything at all to get airborne. The only thing they won't do is build a huge version of those rubber-band-powered balsa wood airplanes that we've all messed around with as kids and—oh, wait, somebody probably has done that. And flown it to Oshkosh.

Last month in the feature "What *Are* These Things?" we looked at an assortment of ultralight and light-sport aircraft. This time around, we're looking at their pilots—who they are and why they fly them.

Of course, if all they wanted was to get airborne, then soon after building their flying gizmos and entering the world of aviation, they would turn to conventional flying. In fact, some do, but many don't.

UP CLOSE AND PERSONAL

If there is one thing that characterizes all of the pilots at the light end of the weight spectrum—ultralights and light-sport aircraft—it is that they like their flying to be downright personal, with a minimum amount between themselves and the air. Some like nothing at all. John Glynn, EAA 629054, a private pilot who flies out of Osceola, Wisconsin, will usually remove the windscreen and all enclosures completely from a Quicksilver GT400 in warm weather. "I just like it completely open," he says. "Just having nothing in front of you." He has owned more than a dozen light aircraft, the heaviest being a Cherokee 140.

Trikes suit Jim Faragher, EAA 563665, who flies out of my home field east of St. Paul, Minnesota. He has a private certificate and 200 hours of sailplane time. "It's as close as you can get to just flying with your arms extended," he says. In other words, flying like Superman, although he would be embarrassed to hear it put that way. Jim is a retired high-school science teacher who

ILLUSTRATION BY **DAVE MATHENY**

once set his students a problem: make a container that would hold an egg so that it could be dropped without breaking from an airplane at 200 feet. No parachutes allowed. (Three eggs survived out of 22 entries.)

Light fliers don't at all object to the things that larger, heavier, faster aircraft can provide: comfort, punching through turbulence, speed, the ability to make cross-country flights. In fact, there are times when my own love of lightness wavers slightly. Very light aircraft are notoriously unhappy with strong wind and turbulence, although it's really the pilots who have a hard time with it. John doesn't mind that sort of stuff. He has even flown backward, relative to the ground, with the GPS reporting a few miles per hour. GPS doesn't know which way the nose is pointed.

Almost all light fliers have flown in winter, although few do it regularly unless they have full enclosures on their aircraft. Even John, who flies almost constantly, doesn't fly as often in winter. I've always remembered a particular winter evening after a fly-in on a frozen Minnesota lake. The Quicksilver MX Sprint I had flown that day had absolutely no structure in front of the pilot's feet (bundle up, no exposed skin, you should be okay). A friend gave me a ride in a Cessna 172. I sat back, unzipped my parka, and soaked up the cushy interior. Warm air issuing softly from the vents, dim glow of instruments—oh yeah, this form of flight definitely has its place.

But then there are summer evenings when you're at 400 feet and smell chicken on a grill, and turn and track it upwind, tacking back and forth until you locate the source, a backyard barbecue, and wag your wings at the happy folks on the ground.

You come to treasure landing back at the home field in the last half-hour before sunset on a warm day. A pale mist will have gathered in the hollows, and as you descend through that last 40 feet above the runway, suddenly a T-shirt isn't quite enough, because there's a faint chill just above the ground, and the mist is a tonic. So you turn the landing into a touch-and-go, and go back and do it again and again.

LOW AND SLOW

One phrase you are guaranteed to hear in any conversation about this kind of flying is "low and slow." Trikes, powered parachutes, and airplane-shaped aircraft classically operate in the bottom 1,000 feet of the sky, and the general, nonflying public seems to be used to it—at least to the extent that if it looks and sounds like an ultralight, they don't call 911 to report an imminent crash.

Although I have devoted several articles to the hazards of getting down really low, in that region from 50 feet down to where you have to look out for snakes, I can't deny the moth-to-a-candle attraction it holds for most pilots, light or heavy. It is just plain exciting. But writing about it is risky because the tendency is to say, in effect, "Now don't

do this, you naughty pilots, but if you do, nudge-nudge wink-wink, observe these precautions," which leaves an odor of insincerity around the place. The slow part seems to make the low part less hazardous, there's no denying, but things that happen down there happen suddenly, and if you're only a few feet up, they happen with real finality.

All of the light-flying pilots I have ever talked to on this subject, which would be all of them, admit to being at least occasional low fliers, and they more than acknowledge the danger—they give serious thought to it. Powered paraglider (PPG) pilot Bob (who asked that his last name not be used because of some nasty comments he received when he posted some low-flying videos on YouTube) says he delights in flying very low over meadows and fields, going so slowly that he can land and take off in two steps if there's just a moderate headwind. He believes he can see any wires that would constitute the main hazard to that sort of flying. It's worth it to him, however. He once landed after an evening's flight with, in his words, "soybeans in my netting on one side and corn tassels in the other."

Kevin Szalapski, EAA 792226, who flies a trike out of Osceola, says the important things for any pilot when flying low are to know the area and to stay focused and not be distracted; "You shouldn't be worried about making the house payment," he says. He's constantly aware of the possibility of engine failure, he says, and knows his best plan is to land straight ahead, if he has to.

Low and slow also equates to "not far from home base." People don't get into this end of sport flying to make long trips. You will not be able to span half the continent in a pleasant day's flying, but that is beside the point. Most of the pilots don't see any reason to go more than 20 miles from their home base, aiming instead just to get some air between them and the ground for an hour or so. But some of the hardier ones will make trips in them. John, the bare-bones guy mentioned above, has flown the 200-plus miles each way to AirVenture each of the past 15 years, hauling camping gear and a few necessities secured to various odd places in the airplane. Same for the egg-dropping Jim, who has flown his trike to Oshkosh four times.

Kitfox pilot Paul Steger, EAA 246592, who keeps his LSA at a small airstrip near Prescott, Wisconsin, does most of his flying within 20 miles of his field. Again, the major exception is Oshkosh, which he has flown to for seven years now. Paul is another light pilot who feels more at home at lower altitudes. "If I get up to 3,000 or 4,000 feet, I feel like I don't belong up here," he says.

Different people get into the sport at the light end for different reasons. Powered parachute (PPC) pilot Brad Dixon, a professional photographer, says he contemplated using the PPC as a platform for photography for a long time. "I thought about it for 20 years," he says. He thinks a lot of people think about some form of flying, but somehow don't do it. "Most don't pull the trigger on that," he says.

Most of the pilots don't see any reason to go more than 20 miles from their home base, aiming instead just to get some air between them and the ground for an hour or so.

You will occasionally hear this branch of aviation described as bugs-in-your-teeth flying. Picturesque but not true. No pilot I know has reported catching actual bugs in his teeth. But at times, in summer, flying toward the setting sun at about 300 feet, you will see long silvery streamers approaching. These turn out to be "ballooning" spiders that have spun enough web to get themselves picked up and carried aloft by the breeze. Apparently it's a form of migration. In any case, the streamers approach but then somehow part and pass over, under, and to the side of the aircraft as it passes through. Every time I see them I smile. Mouth closed.

DOLLAR SIGNS

One of the delights of very light aircraft is low cost. An astute buyer who is also lucky might be able to find a used ultralight for less than $10,000. I just saw a 1983 Quicksilver MX being offered online for $50, including a Rotax 377 engine. My wild guess is that an accomplished, experienced mechanic could make it airworthy for another $3,000. But expect to find ultralights more in the $10,000 to $20,000 range. And as we get into light-sport aircraft (LSA), expect to pay the better part of $100,000. Ultralights, not being certificated aircraft, can be and almost always are maintained by their owners. Although that maintenance is not necessarily up to FAA standards, nothing prevents the owner from doing an excellent job. Some LSA can be maintained by their owners if the owners have a repairman certificate.

Once the up-front cost has been absorbed, the main ongoing expense is likely to be hangar rent, although in some cases even that can be avoided. Powered parachutes and gyroplanes can be stowed on a small trailer. Bob, the corn-tassel collector, uses a very small trailer, but says he could carry his PPG in the back seat of his Honda Accord if he had to. One owner of a Cloud Dancer motorglider ultralight routinely brought his aircraft to my field in the back of a small pickup truck, accepting the 30-minute setup each time as an alternative to paying hangar rent.

Trike wings can be folded and car-topped, but that's actually rare. Most trikes I've ever seen were hangared, but given that small, grass-strip airports rarely charge as much for hangarage as their bigger, hard-surface cousins, even this expense isn't huge.

FREQUENT FLIERS

Many of us—both lightweight and conventional—have done that dismal arithmetic where you write down the total annual cost of your flying on a piece of paper, divide by the number of actual flights in the past year, squint at the result with first one eye and then the other, and throw away the piece of paper. (The same thing applies to boats, motorcycles, snowmobiles, and anything that's fun. My advice: Put away the pencil and paper and do not even start down that dark and lonesome road.) The arithmetic is better for lightweight pilots. They fly more. My impression, not backed up by any actual statistics, is that light fliers do more actual flying than do the pilots of heavier, more conventional aircraft.

A few years back, my wife, Jean, and I were guests at a friend's hangar. He wasn't using it for a while and hated to have it standing empty, so our Quicksilver MX Sprint was welcome. Over the course of two months of flying out of there, we had an occasional ultralight stop by the field, but

only saw one conventional aircraft, a Cessna 140, kept in a nearby hangar, ever actually fly out of there. It was owned by a friendly guy who said that many of the other hangar-owners disapproved of our being there, but themselves rarely flew. He welcomed us and the life we brought to the place.

When ultralights first appeared in the late 1970s, and became for a while incredibly popular, many observers thought that the people who came into the world of flying on these wings of aluminum tubing and sail-cloth fabric would keep right on going and become pilots of conventional aircraft. Many did, me among them, and many became switch-hitters and came to fly both kinds, me among them, too. Down the years, somewhat more than half of those who have been hangar-mates of mine have eventually gotten private or sport certificates. And some have moved more or less sideways. Brent Bruns, a local sport pilot who flies a light-sport PPC, is building a gyroplane.

SPOCK JUST WOULD NOT UNDERSTAND

On the original *Star Trek* series, Mr. Spock was frequently confounded by the way we people of Earth had of doing things for inner, emotional, puzzlingly human reasons. "Highly illogical," he would say, when confronted with love, fear, or hatred. How to explain? Let's see. I love writing about flying and illustrating what I write, which means I spend a lot of time sucking my thumb, gazing into the distance with my eyes unfocused, and contemplating this high comedy in which a bunch of Homo sapiens run around flapping their arm-things and trying to get airborne. Given all that, I ought to have as good a shot as anybody putting into words that one special thing that separates light fliers from normal fliers. But the fact is that there isn't anything, any one thing. We have so much in common with each other that the differences between light and heavy seem to evaporate when looked at closely. Walk down the flightline at Oshkosh and try not to put all of these different, and sometimes bizarre, flying machines into a single category.

Trike pilot Kevin was giving a ride to a man who asked him over the intercom, after 15 minutes of flight over the St. Croix River valley, what he thought about when he was up here. Kevin said he thought that he should say something very profound, "but what came out of my mouth was, 'I just think about how fortunate I am, to be able to be here,'" he says.

So who are these guys? The answer is they are the same as anybody else who flies—people who suffer from a romantic, highly illogical attachment to flying through the air. EAA

Dave Matheny, EAA 184186, is a private pilot and an FAA ground instructor. He has been flying light aircraft, including ultralights, for 30 years. He accepts commissions for his art and can be reached at *DaveMatheny3000@yahoo.com*.