

Feb. 1, 2009 - Robin's Nest Fly-In - The Everglades, Florida

Some two or three dozen years ago, when I used to fly "real airplanes", our trip's generally followed the same routine. Say that we were making a weekend flight from Teterboro, NJ to Mackinac Island, MI. I would begin monitoring weather a few days in advance...usually on the PBS station's 10 minute "AM Weather" program. (no computers, no "Weather Channel" back then). The evening before and the morning of our departure I would phone the FAA's Flight Service number to obtain a weather briefing. If the weather was "nasty" I would file on instruments. If the weather was good, we would just head out to the airport. Once there we would load up our luggage, get in and start the engine(s). Within 30 minutes we would be on our way, talking to very few people along the way. (unless you count the weather briefer, and the tower and air traffic controllers if the aforementioned weather was "nasty"). The plane was a transportation tool, and much like our car, it was there to take us from point "A" to point "B" in the quickest and most efficient manner. Oh sure, when we walked out of the terminal and onto the ramp we would usually look down our nose at the smaller airplanes--those with fixed gear (if we were flying a retractable), or those with single engines (if we were flying the twin) ...just as those business jet pilots were, no doubt, looking down their noses at us. Very little in the way of interaction or personal communication back then. Now that I am flying a "fun airplane", things are immensely different. No longer am I alone for long on the ramp when pre-flying my airplane. Someone will ALWAYS stroll over to inquire about the home built. They want to know who manufactures it, the size and model of the engine, how long it took to build, how much it costs, how fast it flies, etc. etc. It makes for a slower preflight, and a much later departure, but it is fun interacting with fellow pilots.

A few weeks ago I had the opportunity to partake of a "fly-in". For those not familiar with aviation lingo, that is when several airplanes leave a specific destination to fly to a distant destination for the purpose of....well, ...just flying. This particular fly-in was put together by a fellow Highlander pilot Lynn Gardner. Now Lynn is a fascinating lady. She started building her airplane shortly after mine was finished, and flew hers a thousand miles, to the EAA's Oshkosh show the day after it was completed. What made it extra special is that Lynn has a full time job flying for NetJets, which is a charter/fractional leasing company which specializes in large private/business jet aircraft. Lynn is Captain on a Cessna Citation X and pilots it all over this country on a weekly basis. On her every other week off, she would climb into her truck, head out from her home in Gainesville, FL and make the 10 hour drive up to the Just Aircraft Walhalla, SC factory. Once there she would work 12-14 hour days building her airplane before heading back on the evening before her next scheduled week of business flying. Lynn is also a breast cancer survivor and a very, very good pilot. I only wish that I had 10% of her abilities with my Highlander. Anyway, she set up this weekend "fly-in" at a small grass strip located in the South Florida Everglades. The strip, which does not appear on any governmental chart, has the name of "Robin's Nest". Originally cut into the woods at a state forrest preserve, it was allegedly used as a drug runners rendezvous point. When the state took over the land some 30 or 40 years ago, it promptly forgot about this small opening nestled amongst the tall pine trees.



Our group at Sebring's Airpt. Sat. morning lunch



Three Highlanders, flying a close formation



A view down the Robin's Nest grass runway



An Apollo Fox Light Sport on final approach

A year or so ago, a retired Delta Airlines pilot, Captain Robin (last name omitted) built a small modular cabin on this leased state land, just 3 or 4 hundred yards away from the grass "runway". He thought that it would be a good place to fly his Piper Cub into when he made weekend trips from his primary home on the Ft. Lauderdale coastline. Thus it became "Robin's Nest", known to few, including Florida state authorities. Over the past year it has been widened to about 80 feet and its grass cut and rolled to a very well manicured 1400 foot strip. This was to be the destination for our fly-in. Lynn issued an open invitation to other Highlander pilots and even those with "lesser" airplanes to come join her for a weekend trip. Since I was still hanging around South Florida after the Sebring LSA Show, I decided to go.

Our meeting point was to be RJ's Restaurant, located at Sebring airports terminal building. I arrived on Saturday, at the appointed 10 am. Lynn and another Highlander owner, Steve Collins, who lives in Greenville, SC, arrived about an hour later. The 28 degree morning temperature up in Gainesville, Fl. produced some starting problems for Steve's plane...something that I have also become acquainted with when the weather gets really cold. This resulted in our getting together for a 11 am lunch, instead of the 10 am breakfast. By noon we were heading for our respective planes, joined by Randy and Beverly Berry, in their Maule tail dragger. Randy's other business, (he is primarily an Ag spray plane pilot, aircraft mechanic and flight instructor) Eagle Vistas, specializes in aerial photography, and he wanted to take some pictures of our planes in flight. I was asked if I had any experience with formation flying. "Sure", I replied. "I've been to more than a few air shows featuring the Blue Angels and Thunderbirds". I thought that this was a clever answer, but was told to just try to hold a heading and altitude, and the other two would form up on me. The "plus" side was that my plane was the one closest to the camera.

An hour later we were circling a cut-out in the woods, just north of the Alligator Alley portion of I-75 in the Big Cypress Wilderness area. I was the last to land and shortly thereafter we were strolling over to Capt. Robin's home for a cook-out on his porch deck. A few other planes had also arrived by then, and some socializing and "hanger flying" resulted with another retired airline captain, this one with American Airlines, who arrived in his Kit Fox home built. He currently lives in a fly-in community located just outside of Ft. Myers on Florida's west coast. We got into a conversation about his home field, which I learned was paved and 4,000 feet. When I inquired about the planes that were based there, he mentioned a Cessna Citation II that flew from there, but was registered in Canada. Interestingly enough, I had met and had a conversation with that plane's owner, who was also its pilot, just the week before when I made a trip over to the Pahoke airport, on the southeast side of Lake Okachobee. He had landed there immediately before me. Since I use up far less runway, and turned off short, we taxied into the ramp area at the same time. Goes to show what a small world this general aviation thing is.

While several of the group were planning to stay over the night, I had a dinner date with my fiancée and her mother, back in Sebring. So I bid goodbye to my new found friends, realizing that today's flying is more about camaraderie than it is conveyance, and often the trip is just as important as is the destination. An additional benefit... you get to meet and talk to some really interesting people along the way.



Capt. Robin greets new arrival in the Apollo Fox



My airplane, nestled in the Robin's Nest woods



Heading over to our cook out at Capt. Robin's



Back yard view off of the cabin's porch deck