



By Jan Rahn

Managing Editor

The old saying that goes something like, “One man’s trash is another man’s treasure” certainly applies in this case—just ask local pilot Bob Bounds.

Who you might call a lifelong plane fanatic, Bounds acquired a wreck and turned it into something beautiful, flyable and treasurable.

The quest to “reverse engineer” the plane he calls a “Bearcoupe” began seven years ago, using up pretty much all of his spare time.

“I don’t watch too much TV but I’m kind of a slow builder,” said Bounds. “I had to stop working on the plane one summer and build a shop behind my house because the plane outgrew the garage.”

The Story Behind It

Bounds tells the story which started in 1989 when Fred Keller from Alaska built a plane he called a “Prospector” that he flew to Oshkosh, Wisc. Keller won the grand champion trophy.

It is a bush plane that Keller built to fly to his island cabin, said Bounds.

“When I saw the original “Prospector” at Oshkosh, I just fell in love with the looks of it and the idea of flying to back country strips to camp and fish,” said Bounds.

He said this was reinforced when he flew the Vari-eze (the plane he currently flies) to Alaska in 1998 and saw some interesting places to fly that required a bush plane type to land.

Bounds said he talked to Keller and asked if plans were available.

“He very pointedly said, “NO.”

Bounds said he now knows why Keller didn’t have plans—it’s a tough build. So he kind of gave up and went on to build the Vari-eze.

While Bounds was talking about planes several years ago with Perkins County resident Kelvin Kurkowski, Kurkowski said he’d had a ride in a “Prospector” that belonged to a friend of his in Montana.

“Huh?!” was Bounds’ reaction.

“It turned out that Fred Keller had built a second “Prospector” for a friend (former friend, they almost went to court over the price).”

So Bounds called the owner of the second plane in Montana to see if he had plans.

It turned out the pilot had crashed the plane in the mountains of Idaho the previous month, explained Bounds.

Carburetor ice caused an engine failure and the airplane was totally destroyed, severely injuring the pilot and his wife.

The pilot said he'd sure like to see somebody build another one, however, there were no plans available and the airplane was in many pieces. He suggested Bounds try to “reverse engineer” it from the wreckage.

“Well, fool that I am, I hooked onto a trailer and pulled it clear up to western Montana to just take a look in case I could maybe repair the plane,” said Bounds. “It turned out to be pretty well totally destroyed, so of course, I purchased the wreckage.

“Boy, was Deb [wife] ticked. I came dragging home with this pile that I stretch-wrapped onto a trailer and said, “isn't this just cool? Not so much.”

He proceeded to measure, saw, tear, measure again etc., until he had at least some rough drawings to start building with—and building, and building, and building.

It's finally done, inspected, and was flown over the weekend. He has been assigned a limited area to fly in and will be required to complete 40 hours of flight testing before he can leave the area or carry a passenger.

Bounds flew a couple of times Saturday for 30 minutes, circled at 6,500 feet and did some stalls.

“It flies nice, I'm real happy,” he said. “It scares the heck outta ya!”

“This build has been a long and challenging journey,” said Bounds. “It has been fun, frustrating, expensive, but rewarding, mostly because I like building stuff and I'm too dumb or stubborn to give up. Some of the engineering side of the project has been pretty difficult, but I've learned a lot. A lot of the airplane is different from the original and pretty “experimental” so I hope it all works out.”

The enthusiastic pilot obtained his private license in 1986. He was taught to fly by local resident Ole Sihm.

“I think he swore off instructing after that!” said Bounds.

He said as a young boy he was completely nuts over airplanes. He built lots of plastic models and read books about aviation.

“My father was a pilot and gave me my first airplane ride, so he only fanned the flame,” Bounds said.

He flew radio control models as an adult and then learned to fly. He was influenced to try home-building by the late Ed Martens, a local World War II hero.

“I spent a lot of time helping him build planes and considered him a mentor and friend,” said Bounds.

Averaging flying once every week or two for pleasure only, Bounds said he does take passengers.

“I don't take paying passengers as I don't have a commercial pilot's license or a certified airplane,” he said.

Both of his home-built planes are two-seaters.

Bounds said his son Jon has some interest in flying and enjoys it a lot, but like most young people, he has little time or extra money to pursue it.

“My daughter Megan is like my wife—she tolerates flying if it gets her someplace interesting,” said Bounds.

He said his wife Deb tolerates his habit, but is an excellent fiber-glasser.

Bounds said he and Deb take the plane on a whim and fly to Lincoln to visit their son and daughter and family.

The Hobby

Bounds said he what is called a "home-builder."

His planes are licensed in the category of "experimental amateur built."

Experimental aircraft require at least a private pilot's license to fly and are allowed to fly basically anywhere a certified aircraft can fly if they are properly equipped.

They are not allowed to be used for commercial flight.

The range of aircraft included in this group is huge, said Bounds. They range from \$10,000 puddle jumpers to planes like the kitplane called a Lancair Evolution which will cost about \$1.3 million to finish.

"There are quite a few of us home-builders out there," he said.

The total number of homebuilt planes in the U.S. is now over 33,000. Bounds said the most popular brand of kits is made by Van's Aircraft and they are being finished at a rate of about three a week.

Plane home-builders now produce more planes than the certified companies like Cessna and Piper, said Bounds.

The U.S. has some of the most progressive rules in the world pertaining to homebuilt aircraft and this allows for a lot of innovation.

Most home-builders, including Bounds, are members of the "Experimental Aircraft Association" but a lot of the members are not builders, just airplane enthusiasts.

The EAA (Experimental Aircraft Association) has an annual fly-in in Oshkosh, Wisc. called Airventure that he has attended several times.

"For the week of that convention, Oshkosh is the busiest airport in the world with thousands of airplanes there and over 50,000 people camped on the field," said Bounds.

He serves as secretary/treasurer of a local chapter of the EAA that has given introductory airplane rides to over 1,000 kids between the ages of eight and 17 as part of a national program called "Young Eagles."

The local chapter meets semi monthly, "Mostly to tell lies and drink coffee!" he said.

