

Oshkosh 2021:



The Big One Is Back

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Cessna Pilots Magazine, originally published: August 2021

Oshkosh. In the world of aviation, there are few words that evoke such a variety of experiences, opportunities, memories and connections. The Public Relations team may brand it *AirVenture*, and the more formal among us may term it the Experimental Aircraft Association International Fly-in, but for most aviators just the word “Oshkosh” sends a thrill up our spine and puts a smile on our faces. For the 2021 event, your Cessna Pilots Association dispatched two scribes to report on the status of the world’s largest airshow.

If you haven’t been to Oshkosh, whatever you think about it is inadequate. It’s one of those life-changing events you must experience to understand; it’s the Super Bowl, World Series and Olympics all rolled into one giant extravaganza. Words and photos fail to communicate the size and energy of the event. It is a week of total immersion and complete saturation in all things related to aviation.

The Numbers Tell the Tale

The statistics are eye-popping: 608,000 visitors walked through the gates and 10,000+ aircraft parked on the grounds at Wittman and surrounding airports. Friendly ATC controllers pushed 16,378 aircraft through the sky in just ten days, making KOSH more than twice as busy as JFK in New York City.

Over 5,000 volunteers contributed over 250,000 hours of free labor: marshalling planes, selling tickets, directing traffic and preparing meals for other volunteers.



Oshkosh 2021 from the air, with north to the left in this photo. The popular “North 40” campground is in at lower-left corner of this image and is where the “Cessnas2Oshkosh” mass arrival campground was located (red arrow, see accompanying article in this magazine). At the extreme lower left, the thin white Goodyear blimp is spins at anchor at the Pioneer Museum (purple arrow). The airshow flight line runs left-to-right at the top of the photo, over runway 18/36. Boeing Plaza (yellow arrow) is the large concrete pad just about at the center of the photo; the four exhibitor hangars are clearly visible next to the Plaza. Photo Credit: EAA

Spend a few minutes at Oshkosh and you’re likely to see, hear, smell, taste and touch (if allowed) some of the most gorgeous examples of aircraft ever built, many looking like they just rolled out of the factory. A dozen DC-3/C-47s were scattered like candy across the flight line, some in their D-Day livery. They are much appreciated by the hundreds of airshow fans who congregate in the shade under those giant wings. The line-up of polished and elegant Cessna 195s was stunning, while the array of antique, fabric-winged biplanes was a photographer’s dream.

More impressive statistics: there were 1,420 vintage (pre-1970) aircraft, 1,089 homebuilt aircraft, 354 warbirds, 148 aerobatic planes, 33 ultralights and 27 rotorcraft. Many other beautiful birds simply flew in and parked without registering for judging, available for visitors who had the legs to walk that far to admire.

While you're feasting your eyes on parked planes, there's lots going on in the air. Five runways are used at KOSH during the show. Runway 18/36 and a parallel taxiway converted into a runway for the week are generally used for airshow traffic, while Runway 9/27 is used mostly for GA arrivals and departures. Near the south end of Runway 18/36 there is a tightly-manicured grass runway called the "Fun Fly Zone" where dozens of Light Sport aircraft, helicopters, ultralights, powered parachutes and hang gliders buzz around like a hive of hyperactive bees, their pilots trying and failing to control their ear-to-ear grins.



The gate with the historic Ford trimotor racing by.

But there is more — at Oshkosh, there always is more! There's a second grass runway called the Pioneer Airport that is mostly used by sight-seeing helicopters. This year it was shared with the Goodyear blimp. It's next to the EAA Museum, which is filled with a

world-class collection of airplanes of all vintages. Lastly there is a full-featured seaplane base in a cove on Lake Winnebago, with frequent shuttle buses to and from Wittman Airport. Other nearby airports including Fond du Lac, Appleton, and Green Bay take some of the overflow traffic.

The heart of Oshkosh is the daily airshow, which is incredible, and we mean that very literally. There are performers in airplanes doing things that airplanes simply can't do. The best performers always appear because, well, it's the Big Show. Most days feature skydivers and mass formations of 30 or more smoke-trailing warbirds. Early in the week, the heart of the shows is primarily jaw-dropping aerobatics. The Friday and Saturday shows are dominated by the warbirds and military performance teams. The Wednesday twilight show (delayed this year until Thursday due to a thunderstorm) is a fabulous ballet of planes, flares and fireworks. In every case, the shows are absolutely stunning. However, after several days, you may conclude that the middle of the airshow is the best time to take a shower because everybody else is out on the flight line saying, "Holy bleep, did he just do that?"

Two aerial accomplishments struck us particularly noteworthy. The first was a mind-boggling display of inverted flight and repeated loops *in a helicopter*. It's hard to imagine the courage it took to try that for the first time without an ejection seat. Can't you see the engineers with their slide rules talking to the skeptical pilot? "Yep, sure thing, boss, it'll work like a charm. You go first!"

The second airshow wonder was the graceful dance of the enormous Goodyear blimp — a semi-rigid monster almost the length of a football field — looking for all the world like a dignified elephant gently dancing across a field of scampering visitors and planes. The pilots of that behemoth had it rolling, nosing up and down at steep angles, bucking the



The Goodyear blimp was stabled every night on the northwest corner of Pioneer Field, right behind the Cessnas2Oshkosh campgrounds.

crosswinds and twisting in tight pirouettes. While neither as noisy as the fighter jets nor as eye-popping as Patty Wagstaff, it was an awesome example of aeronautical excellence and a reminder of the enormous variety and utility of aviation.

Outside of the Airshows

The airshow stops all other flying activity at the airport for three hours every afternoon. During the other hours of the day, helicopters are constantly circling overhead giving rides, Cessnas and Pipers swirl through the pattern with arrivals and departures, warbirds

growl to life and take off just for fun, and military jets do their best to shatter eardrums as they buzz the tower in full afterburner. (One F-16 driver broke the sound barrier about 300 feet from the crowd this year; he's now probably flying the mail run to Mogadishu.)

Then there's another kind of traffic — on the ground. Be careful where you stand while gazing upward, lest you be squished by the hundreds of wheeled vehicles. If you happen to be fortunate enough (or unlucky enough, depending on your point of view) to be staying in Camp Scholler, the traffic in the evenings is like Times Square on New Year's Eve. But it's not just the quantity of traffic, it's the variety.



Thousands of planes crowded the campgrounds. This scene is about mid-field on Runway 18/36 on a cloudy Wednesday morning. Unlike other Oshkosh events, despite the strong storms on Sunday and Wednesday reports of destroyed tents were very few, and we heard of no damaged airplanes at all.

Case in point: since local schools are closed in the summer months, the EAA efficiently shanghaied dozens of idled school buses to transport volunteers and campers around and between the airports and various off-site locations. EAA executives and airshow sponsors raced around the facility in golf carts. Box trucks delivered food and essentials, utility vans kept the phones working and the lights on, and omnipresent trams loaded with sweaty, sun-burned visitors rolled along dusty lanes behind shiny green John Deere tractors.



At Oshkosh, pilots usually don't talk to Ground Control because there would be too many planes on the frequencies. Airplanes are guided to their parking spots by volunteers on scooters.

Some years ago, the EAA acquired dozens of obsolete VW bugs, cut off their roofs, and made them a visible icon of the event. Plus there were aviation fuel trucks, antique cars offering rides, motorcycles, scooters, bicycles (many of them electric this year), unicycles, Segways and the occasional

septic-sucker truck flitting between portable toilets like a giant bumblebee on a field of clover. We had the pleasure to meet and chat with Canadian aviatrix Angie Vogel as she rolled past the North Forty at about five knots on her electrified one-wheel skateboard. Have you ever met a Canadian who didn't know how to have fun?

Eventually, the noise fades after the airport closes at 2000. "Quiet time" in the camping areas supposedly starts at 2230. While the hum of hundreds of generators powering air-conditioners in campers may lull you to sleep, the

traffic noise from nearby Highway 41 never seems to end. The airport opens for departures at 0600 and the whole circus roars to life again with the dawn patrol T-6s taking off in formation. At 0730, an unearthly shriek like a badger undergoing surgery without benefit of anesthetic erupts from the loudspeakers along the flight line; it's the wakeup yodeler and we're told he's an Oshkosh tradition. Maybe so, but that's one tradition we'd happily forego. A bugler playing reveille might be better; humble silence would be best.

Better Amenities

Oshkosh does have its amenities. The food vendors have been vastly upgraded from the days when every eatery was operated by the same vendor and had essentially the same menu of basic burgers, salads, fries and sodas. Nowadays you can find places to eat that are operated by higher-end

restaurants from the area; many even offer a glass of wine or a beer with your meal. Transportation services make it relatively easy to get where you want to go, albeit with a bit of queueing up and waiting. There are reasonably convenient stores on-site with groceries, camping supplies and bags of ice sufficient to meet most of the needs of an airshow crowd. Even the porta-potties are cleaned daily and seldom deserve reproach, considering their nature, but your intrepid reporters call a foul with the budget-minded, see-through toilet paper. There are now actually some modern air-conditioned restrooms on the grounds, a huge improvement from years past.



Boeing Plaza is a massive slab of concrete capable of handling the biggest and baddest birds. Here, enormous crowds lined up in the shade of a Boeing 747 freighter to see how UPS moves long-haul freight.

And then there are the, ahem, bathing facilities. There are some very nice shower trailers with private stalls in several areas. But for most campers, the

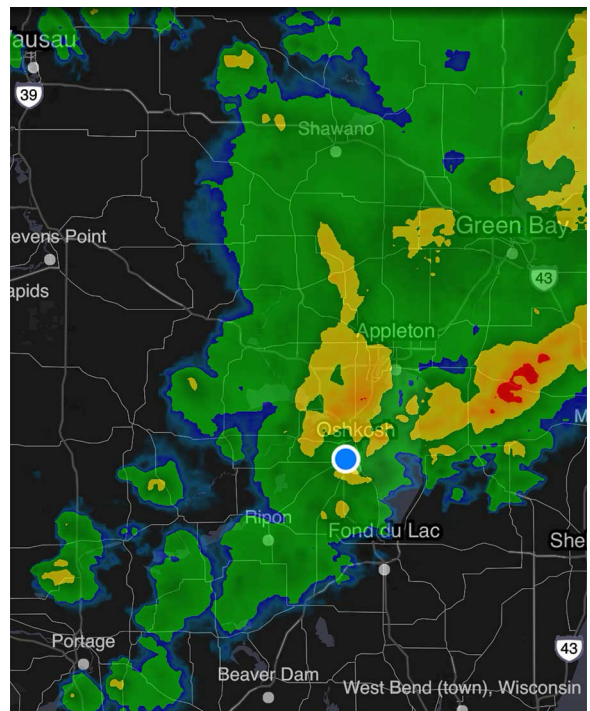


Adjacent to Boeing Plaza are four massive hangars filled with more than 700 exhibitors, and the crowds were large but not overwhelming. I stopped into the Powerflow booth because they have numerous STCs for Cessnas which add horsepower, enhance engine longevity and simplify maintenance. From left to right, Jim Shafer and Andy Tilman from Powerflow, chatting with Clayton and Cuyles Baldwin who fly a Cessna 182 out of Grand Junction, CO.

Holding the spray nozzle with one hand while lathering the soap with the other requires significant dexterity. The best that can be said is that the water is hot and plentiful, but the cramped quarters force everybody to become better acquainted with their neighbors than most of us would really care to be. If you drop your bar of soap in the communal floor drain channel, forget it and just buy a new one.

The “gorilla in the room” at Oshkosh is the weather, and 2021 did not disappoint. Saturday was bright and clear with a spectacular full moon. Most days were hot;

original-style shower facilities are still the most conveniently located. Imagine, if you will, a room with rows of plastic-curtained enclosures, each approximately the size of a phone booth. A kitchen sink spray hose dangles from a pipe overhead. You must be careful where you point these, lest you hose down someone freshly dressed.



The Wednesday night storm, as depicted on Mike's iPhone. Luckily, the hailstorm and tornado narrowly missed the main show sites.

low 90s and high humidity made for sweltering airshows. Sunday night and Wednesday night featured significant thunderstorms, which are always entertaining when 10,000 people are camping beneath the wings of their planes. The Wednesday storm was a true gully-washer, with forecasts of large hail and tornadoes threatening our thin-skinned birds.



Thousands of people were evacuated to the Pioneer Museum for safety, which made for an uncomfortable but drier night.

Our educated guess is that at least a quarter of the planes on the field decamped for safer skies before the airport closed for the evening. Many of the folks who remained were evacuated by school buses to the Museum, where they

slept safely amongst the historical displays in that rugged structure. Smart folks.

In the meantime, your two reporters, either stalwart or stupid (sometimes it's hard to tell the difference), remained in our tents and enjoyed a spectacularly thunderous light show. The sun rose in the morning to reveal our planes were unscathed and our tents were undamaged. It was, however, a close-run thing; a hailstorm hit Green Bay a few miles to the north, and the town of Ripon ten miles to the southwest was struck by a tornado.

All that said, this report is just but a tiny taste of the Oshkosh adventure. There were 1,105 forums, workshops and presentations on every aviation-related topic you can imagine. In the Homebuilt Hangar you could try your hand at forming sheet metal, making composite wings, or covering structures with fabric. There are huge hangars filled with exhibitors

featuring all the latest astounding avionics and other toys. Central Boeing Plaza features the biggest planes and enormous crowds, while the warbird display is not to be missed. There is even a flea market where almost anything aeronautical can be purchased for pennies. Your roving reporters agree wholeheartedly: there is nothing like it on the planet, and we can't wait to return in 2022! If you haven't been there, you owe it to yourself to plan a trip to Oshkosh and experience it for yourself.





Another aerial view from the south of the Fun Fly Zone, South 40 and Runway 36. Photo by Connor Madison, courtesy EAA



A small portion of the North 40 parking/camping zone. Photo by Connor Madison, courtesy EAA



A row of beautiful Cessna 195s in the Vintage area. Photo by Jack Fleetwood, courtesy EAA.

About the Author

Mike Jones is a 4,000 hour commercial-rated pilot who has more than 50 aircraft types in his logbook. His pride and joy is a Cessna T210, which has carried him to every corner of the U.S. and Canada for more than twenty years. He's always accessible at PilotMike2012@gmail.com.

