

A man with a beard, wearing a blue t-shirt with a 'Seaplane' logo, a grey baseball cap, and sunglasses, is leaning over the side of a white floatplane. He is holding a blue tool or hose, and water is splashing from the plane's edge. The background shows a grassy area and a building.

*Floatplanes
Compared—
It's that
24th Gene*

Floatplanes Compared: It's That 24th Gene

By Mike Jones

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I predict that in the next few years somebody will discover that seaplane pilots are genetically different, crazy different. Maybe it's extra genes or different chromosomes, but their eccentricity is undeniable. Seaplane drivers are far happier than normal mortals, even laughing during their take-offs. They eagerly fly draggy, under-powered airplanes to inaccessible locations. Plus, there's only about 35,000 of them — proof they're a pretty freakish bunch.

Which begets the question: what's the best Cessna product for this merry band?

Being completely unqualified in anything nautical — I don't even own a bathtub — I am proud to serve as an unbiased judge. As such, I have spent this past Spring bouncing float planes with four of the most skilled pilots I have ever had the joy to meet. I tested a broad spectrum of Cessnas and found one, indeed, which floats above all the others. Let me get my rubber duckie and we'll get started.

Brian Schanche and His Cessna 185F

Adventure Seaplanes migrates farther than Canada geese. It operates during the summer months from Tower Municipal Airport (12D) in Minnesota. But when the snows threaten, Brian Schanche and his family migrate to Winter

Haven Airport (KGIF) in central Florida. Brian's a broad-shouldered grizzly bear of a pilot with 14,000 hours and hands the size of catchers' mitts. He has a deep grab-bag of tricks to make his floatplane deliver the performance he expects.



Brian Schanche drives a Cessna 185F, N185AS. He and his family migrate to Winter Haven Airport (KGIF) in central Florida every autumn. Brian's logged 14,000 hours and has a deep grab-bag of tricks to make his floatplane deliver the performance he expects..

Brian drives a Cessna 185F, N185AS. This plane is tall, topping than thirteen feet on its Aerocet floats. Just climbing into the plane gave me acrophobia. Manufactured in 1976, it's powered by the same sturdy Continental IO-520 engine which drives so many big Cessnas. Brian's normal cruise is 110-115 knots at 16 gph using a two-bladed McCauley prop.

Inside, the plane is well-equipped but vintage VFR. I ask about the two odd levers between the seats. The big hunk of rebar is from Cessna and controls the

manual flaps. The light aluminum tube came from Aerocet and controls the water rudders. Don't mix them up, Brian coaches.

Once settled into the left seat, I attempted to taxi but the casting nose wheels baffled me. We wallowed from side to side. "It's like trying to taxi a shopping cart," Brian laughed.



Eventually we staggered to the runway. Protective of his engine, Brian starts take-offs with a small burst of power to get the plane moving. Only when we have some airspeed and positive control is established does he go to full throttle. Lightly loaded, we quickly popped up to 900 feet. Brian flipped the gear-up lever but it didn't make much difference; with 300 hp the C-185 climbs sprightly.

As we cruised to our first lake, the C-185 felt stable, rugged and loyal, a hard-working partner on Brian's team. For most of our flight we quivered below 600 feet as we pounced from lake to lake. Noise levels were moderate. Hands-off flight was easy. A touch of rudder keeps the nose straight and true. Easy flying.

Brian briefed me to keep some power on during landings because the big Continental drags the nose down. I said I hadn't seen that behavior in my T210 with nearly the same engine, so he pulled the power to near-idle. Instantly trees filled the windscreen. Both my heart and my iPad banged into the headliner. He returned the power to 23-square and the clouds returned to their rightful position. A very convincing demonstration. Defibrillators, anyone?

Our first water landing started downwind at 90 knots and 1600 rpm. A second yank on the flaps put us on base at 85 knots. Brian finished with either 30° or 40° of flaps. Touchdown is surprisingly stable and, once wet, the plane slows quickly. We grappled with the water-rudders and taxied the plane, paying attention to the wind.

For my first water take-off we taxied to our starting point and picked a target on the horizon. Water-rudders up, trim adjusted, 10° flaps, and then — just like a land take-off — he gently adds power to chug along and only when stable does he go to full power. The plane lifts off in about 18 seconds, shedding alligators and climbing quickly.

At another lake Brian demonstrated his “short field” technique. This pond was small, the pattern was tight, and to my inexperienced eyes he was aiming at the shore instead of the water. The trees almost grabbed the floats. But with a tiny bit of flare he kissed the water just 100 yards from the beach. Very impressive plane-handling.

Then we had to get out of this puddle. Flaps up, we taxied towards the shoreline and pointed the plane directly into the wind. The plane accelerated aggressively without the extra drag of flaps. The lake rapped the floats hard: thump, thump THUMP! We've got speed but not the lift. Trees looming, he yanked on the flaps, throwing 30° into the breeze. The plane's nose jumped skyward and suddenly we're climbing like an angel, the trees flashing below, my heart racing.

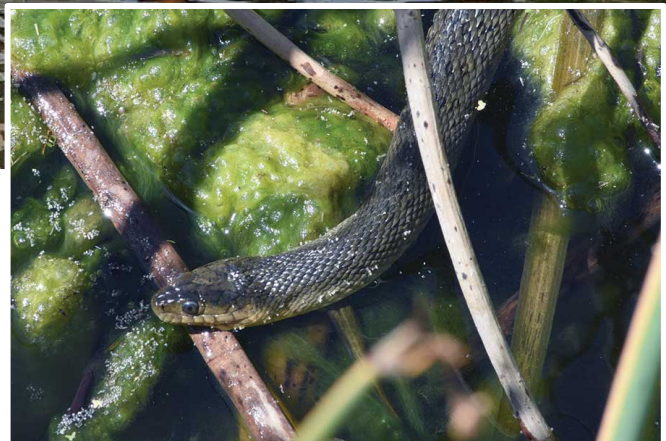
Rob Galloway and His Cessna 140

N72475 is a diminutive C-140 made in 1946 and owned by Jones Brothers Seaplane Adventures in Tavares, FL. She is an anachronistic bauble: designed as a tail-dragger but built on straight floats, she features fabric wings, aluminum fuselage and faded paint. The panel is Smithsonian-grade VFR. The yoke is a tiny hoop the thickness of a pencil. The manual flaps are operated by a paper-

clip sized lever. Everything is delicate. She's old enough for Social Security, for heaven's sake.



This delightful Cessna 140 came off the assembly line in 1946. It has always been on "straight" floats so it's restricted to water landings. Here, owner Rob Galloway wades in Lake Dora to preflight the plane. The allure of float plane flying is dramatically reduced when you find this three-foot fellow next to your plane. Alligators have a similar effect on some passengers.



Under the cowlings, there's a four-cylinder Lycoming O-290 delivering 135 hp to the fixed-pitch prop. The V-speeds are easy to remember: rotate at 65 mph, 75 mph is for everything exciting, and a rollicking 95 mph is good for cruising. Simple is good.

Pilot and owner Rob Galloway wore shorts and flip-flops because he often wades into the lake to preflight or reposition the plane. We climbed aboard. The

cabin was tighter than my New York apartment. I had difficulty closing my door because our shoulders bumped. We sat low, barely off the floor, and our legs stuck straight-out, sports-car like. The windows were open and a nice breeze floated through.

Unlike Brian, Ron didn't finesse the engine. He just pushed the miniscule throttle into the firewall. The plane plowed across the lake like a tired farm horse but, once it realized we were serious about flying it decided to join the party and get up on the step.

I felt like I was inside a Cuisinart; everything was shaking back and forth, dust was falling from the overhead, the floats were rattling. Even tiny waves from passing boats rocked the plane sharply. But just as Rob promised, about 65 mph she lifts off and instantly everything became glassy smooth.



The panel of the Cessna 140 is vintage VFR Cessna engineering. We're level at 700 feet over Lake Dora, motoring along at 100 miles per hour, cranking about 2500 rpm on the little Lycoming engine. In this age of flat-screens and magenta lines, simplicity is heart-warming.

We climbed to 500 feet and wallowed into a few turns, getting a feel for the plane. The yoke seemed quite loose. I rolled the yoke 120° to start a turn and quickly had to reverse an equal distance to straighten out. This plane is a kite and it dances in the morning breeze.

We popped over to another lake for our first landing. We flew a normal but low downwind, base and final. As Rob predicted, the plane loves 75 mph. We started with 10° of flaps, then added another 10° and touched down smoothly.

I'm surprised again with the violent vibration the plane endures when it touches down.

Rob adds power for a “splash and go”— the first time I've ever heard the term, much less attempted one — and it worked smoothly. We slogged our way back up to 500 feet to fly the pattern again. Holding the nose high, I made my best landing so far; the rear tips of the floats just kissed the water and the plane settled nicely. Again, we landed with a little power and lots of nose-high trim. Two more landings and I'm finally having fun. Rob even volunteered a cautious, “Well done.” I preen.

Rob suggested a descent to 50 feet and a heading to the north. Surprised, I asked him to confirm his instructions because I've never cruised anywhere at 500 feet, much less 50 feet. He assured me it was safe so I unloaded the wings and we dropped into the mouth of a small river. Below the tree tops — just above the fishermen and their flaying fists — we raced upstream, yanking and banking in harmony with the riverbed. We dashed beneath a surprised vulture. I spied a highway bridge in the distance so I popped up and broke right, then swerved back left and returned to the river in the opposite direction, basically having nailed the front half of a “lazy eight.” I'm laughing, giddy and cheering at the silly exuberance of the whole experience.

Finally we head back and flop down back in Lake Dora. I'm breathless. Rob skillfully step-taxied our way among other float planes, boats, and a hundred mindless jet skis. He pulled the power and the plane settled into the water for a quick drift into the FBO. My hour passed in the blink of an eye and I cannot remember having so much fun.

Sheena Hoover and Her Cessna 206G

Sheena Hoover and Michael Hoover are professional flight instructors who own Treasure Coast Seaplanes in Vero Beach, FL (KVRB). They were teaching at Flight Safety at Vero Beach when their romance began.

“The very first conversation I ever had with Michael was about wanting to be a seaplane pilot,” Sheena recalls. They started TCS in 2016 and mostly offered sight-seeing tours. Today, they’re spending more of their time teaching.



Sheena Hoover and her massive Cessna 206 in Vero Beach Florida. Flying the hugely capable plane was fun but not terribly exciting. My Oshkosh flying buddy, Vance Envik, flew C-206s in Canada back country for years and feels it's the best floatplane ever made. I was hugely impressed but not titillated.

“The market for float plane training is steadily growing,” she related. “The 206 is a great training plane for experienced pilots.”

Their baby is a giant: a 1979 Cessna 206G Skywagon, perched high on Wipaire floats the size of great white sharks. The useful load is a massive 1127 lbs. Powered by a fuel-injected six-cylinder Continental IO-520 producing 300 hp behind a three-bladed prop, the plane seats six in spacious comfort. Cross-country, she cruises at 110 knots burning 12 gals./hour.

Sheena takes floatplane flying very seriously. We shared a lengthy ground briefing, an even more thorough pre-flight, and then a safety briefing which included donning a life jacket and learning how to use the underwater breathing apparatus she has for each seat in the plane. I was mightily impressed with the forethought and preparation.

We taxied out on a windy Florida morning. Sheena used 10° of flaps, full throttle and just the slightest back-pressure to rotate at 60 knots. The massive plane soared easily to 800 feet and Sheena settled in at 24-square, motoring along. Stable and strong, it felt like a Greyhound bus.

We flew northwest of Vero to a wildlife reserve with numerous lakes. Smoothly we turned downwind at 500 feet, 10° flaps and 100 knots. Turning base we were at 300 feet, 20° flaps and 90 knots. Final was at 30° flaps and 80 knots. Compared to the other floatplanes, this felt very fast. At lower speeds the heavy floats were pendulums and I kept working the rudders. I also carried more power than I expected, compared to my very similar T210. The big Cessna was very draggy so Sheena kept coaching me to add power, add a touch more, because "below 70 knots the plane falls out of the sky." I must be a slow learner.

We step-taxied around the lake, throwing a huge wake at the fishermen as we practiced turns. It takes full power to get up on the step to taxi; basically it's an aborted take-off that runs on forever. The ride was bouncy but not nearly as jarring as the feather-light Cessna 140. Sheena told me their triangular windscreen brace snapped last year due to metal fatigue from years of high-speed taxi.

For take-off, we set flaps to 20°, yoke back, throttle full and the nose high. As the plane gets up on the second step the nose goes even higher. Then the plane leveled and accelerated even more, in a flatter, faster take-off posture. We lifted off at 60 knots, pushed the nose down, accelerated and climbed. It was

about as exciting as a Delta take-off from Atlanta, which is the whole point of the Skywagon design.

Susan VanFleet and Her Cessna 172K

Based in Hickory, NC (KHKY), Susan VanFleet flies N736RX, a bright Cessna 172K with a six-cylinder, 210 hp Continental IO-360K turning a constant-speed prop. Since the original C-172 only had 145 hp one doesn't have to be an aerospace engineer to predict exciting performance from Susan's red and white beastie. Loaded with floats, autopilot, ADS-B, and more the plane only carries a modest 636 pound useful load but burns an economical 8 gals./hour. Sweet!

We strolled out to the plane and climbed into our life jackets while Susan briefed me on her normal procedures. She uses 20° of flaps for take-off. "46 knots is the magic speed, with flaps and stuff," Susan explained. Despite the extra power, "it's not as spiffy as your normal land-based C-172. If you go full



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power she's going to waddle along for a minute; all that drag just slows you down."

We preflighted the plane and taxied out for a gentle take-off downhill on Runway 24. To my hands, the plane felt eager to get into the air. This Cessna wants to fly.

We motored out of the Class D airspace to a long slender east-west lake, formed when Duke Power dammed the Catawba River. Safety is top-of mind for Susan so we spend extra time scanning for floating debris. "We broke a 125-year record for rain this Spring," she explained. "We have three rivers that feed into here, coming off the mountains, bringing debris and logs and things like that. The logs, they absorb water, sink a little bit and you can't see them. You have got to take your time. Fly the pattern over and over, 200 feet, even 100 feet, until you're sure the path is clear."

"Flying seaplanes is all about planning and preparation. There aren't many hot-dogging seaplane pilots. Not living ones, anyway."

— Susan VanFleet

Susan worked me through her water-landing checklist. I held the nose high on short final, added just a touch of power, and we skimmed over the traffic on Castle Bridge. I'm confident in my C-172 skills, but the bigger engine,

the different instruments, the momentum of the floats, the constant-speed prop, the lack of a runway and the barrage of instructions left me a little behind the plane. Yoke back in my lap, we thwacked down "firmly." Susan was not impressed.

The river was narrow, maybe 200 yards wide. The winds were gently from the southwest, barely rippling the water. We taxied back to the bridge and

began our take-off. Like all of the Cessna float planes, the nose jumps high at the burst of power and then, as the plane accelerates, the nose goes even higher — the feeling of tipping over backwards was quite pronounced in this light, over-engined airplane.

But this take-off doesn't suffer the buffeting of my flights in Florida; the ride seemed to be more gentle, perhaps because the water was smoother. At 39 knots the nose starts to drop and the plane levels off high "on the step." We're screaming down the lake, leaving a thin, flat, low-drag wake. We lifted off at 46 knots, exactly as Susan predicted.

We pounced over to Lake James, another Duke Power gem in the foothills. We rapidly pop in and out of the lake and worked our way around boats, buoys and birds. We never climbed over 500 AGL. If you're the owner of a large mansion on Knollview Drive, I apologize for nearly knocking your chimney into the lake, but it wasn't my fault. Susan had me working.

Through all this, the Skyhawk rumbled along contentedly, easily breaking free of the water, slowly climbing above the ridges, and then splashing in again. During these turns I noticed the adverse yaw caused by the floats and the engine pulling in opposite directions. It took extreme right rudder to bring the tail back behind the plane.

In a world where big engines and burly floats get pride of place, Susan vigorously defended her selection of the diminutive Skyhawk. Costs are an important factor in the pilot training world. "If I had a family and had people to carry I would buy a 182. The C-206 is a fabulous floatplane, but it's 18 gals./hour. That's not the market I'm in. For training, this is the best."

And the Winner Is...

There's no doubt that Brian, Rob, Sheena, and Susan all have great airplanes, and each is extremely well-suited to the missions they fly. Here's my take on the line-up:

- ◆ The C-206 is the largest and most capable but also the most expensive to buy and operate. If you need to carry a dead moose or a lively wedding party, there is no contest.
- ◆ The C-185 is a charmer. It can carry a lot and fly reasonably fast, was more nimble than the larger 206, and slightly cheaper to operate. As a family touring machine, it would be a great choice.
- ◆ The modified C-172 was delightful, and with 45% more power it rode better than any C-172 I'd ever flown. The 600+ pound useful load is a problem, so it's best considered a two-seater with privileges.
- ◆ The C-140 on straight floats was so demure I felt like I was cheating on my wife. If I lived in Florida with thousands of lakes she'd be mine. But as a practical tool for transportation, I just couldn't bring her home to meet Mom.

My final choice? The Cessna 172. For this flyer, it's the perfect mix of practicality, capability and cost. I officially have been bitten by the float plane bug. Maybe that 24th gene is in my blood, too. "Honey," I'll announce tomorrow, "we're moving to the lake. Any lake, with sand bars and log cabins. And we're buying another plane."

She'll be sending me the divorce papers forthwith.

About the Author



With about five hours of floatplane time, Mike Jones is not quite ready for his bush-pilot rating. He's based in Pinehurst, NC and is eagerly looking forward to learning more about floatplanes in all the different varieties. You always can reach him at PilotMike2012@gmail.com.