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SPORTS CORNER

by Garde Wells

Popular Airport: Ultralights

Shannon Nill makes the last few pre-flight inspections on his ultra-light-class aircraft, scanning each and every fitting where strut meets cable. "Clear!" he shouts as his observer decides to get away from the scene in a hurry. A Rotax brand, 40-horsepower snowmobile engine, its drive-shaft attached by four fanbelts to a rear-facing propeller shaft, hums into action.

The pilot jumps into his cockpit, actually a fiberglass seat with a fairing, and runs up the engine's RPM's a few times. He glances at a digital readout on his cylinder-head temperature gauge.

The hang-gliding go-cart then blows across the field to the gravel runway (it's possible to launch an ultralight from a field), faces straight into the wind, and after a 20-yard roll—human flight!

"He's actually flying himself in that thing!" stutters the amazed observer as the motorized kite climbs steeply into the airspace along I-5 next to Daniels Field, north of Eugene.

Nill's rig maxes out at close to 255 pounds—the heaviest allowable weight under Federal Aviation Regulation 103, one of a dozen FAR directives that defines "ultralight." Another rule states that the ultralight must have a top speed of 55 m.p.h.

Shannon Nill flies about once a week. "Normally you have to restrict flying to mornings and evenings . . . surprisingly there's some nice flying in the winter months around here." He explains that winds become prohibitive during most of the day.

Wind velocities in excess of 10 or 15 knots make it unmanageable to take off or to land the aircraft. In the warm seasons, "thermals," updrafts resulting from radiant earth warmth, will substantially affect an ultralight. "Summer can be a lot of work."

Nill has flown to the coast, from Albany, reaching altitudes of 7,000 feet. "You can't fly over cities or towns," says Shannon, referring to the FAR directives that obviously are second nature for him. "You have to stay out of traffic control zones (i.e., airports)," he goes on. "Most ultralights don't have radios anyway."

Nill's ultralight has no radio. It does have a "panic button" on the dashboard of the cockpit, which is merely a sticker. "An ultralight is not a toy; you treat it like an airplane," says the pilot, as serious as an easy going fellow can be.

Nill belongs to the Knox Butte Flying Club (in Albany) that mostly includes ultralight fliers among its membership. He cites the excellent training he received there when he first dabbled in the sport. Nill is

acutely aware of the reputation for lack of safety that has shadowed ultralights in the few years that the aircraft have been in existence.

In 1985 there was a multiple-fatality crash near Fern Ridge Reservoir involving three ultralight aircraft. "I knew the instructor," begins Nill. In the accident's post-mortem, investigators determined that one ultralight pilot, who was a local instructor, flew a vertical loop, and came back down upon two other aircraft. "I remember him telling me once that 'you've got to bend a few struts if you want to learn how to fly,' and I thought to myself, 'Gee, my instructor (in Albany) never teaches me anything like that.'"

"There's been a lot of weeding out (in this sport)," says Nill, referring to a new form of flying that saw much foolhardiness at first. "In today's arena, you can learn how to fly with a qualified instructor . . . it's a lot better than the old days, that's for sure."

One of Nill's favorite routes is to fly from Daniels Field near Harrisburg (where he moors his craft) heading west towards Fern Ridge, then south, circling around Spencer Butte, then turning north and coming back up over Interstate 5 to the field.

"Once you get up there, the roads become insignificant. We get so used to traveling everywhere on roads . . . they actually take up a very small part of the landscape." Shannon has flown in a regular single-engine aircraft, but thinks ultralights are more fun.

How far can he fly? He says that with a three-hour cruise range "you could fly probably about to Portland from here. But if you've flown for an hour, you're probably ready to set it down . . . wipe the bugs off your teeth."

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