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Ultralights: one strange bird

By Harry Esteve
Of the Emerald

About a decade ago, someone attached an engine and a propeller to a hang glider and gave birth to a new type of flying machine — the "ultralight."

Since then the craft have matured gracefully. They have now been refined and sophisticated to the point where they no longer can be referred to as motorized hang gliders, says a Eugene man who deals in them.

"They're very distinct," says Larry Willis who sells ultralights from his home on Clear Lake Road. It's easy to tell an ultralight from a hang glider, he says.

The Quicksilver line of ultralights, which he deals in, have the same design as most single-engine airplanes, Willis explains. That includes a main body, wings and a tail rudder.

Hang gliders, on the other hand, are designed to resemble large kites from which the flyer is suspended.

At 50 horsepower, some of the ultralight engines have the same amount of muscle as a small Cessna, although most operate on about 30 horsepower.

The main differences are the materials the craft are made of, primarily nylon and aluminum.

The Federal Aviation Administration has drawn strict guidelines to keep the two kinds of flying machines separate.

To begin with, ultralights cannot weigh more than 254 pounds. Under FAA rules, they also cannot seat more than one passenger, fly over 10,000 feet, carry more than five gallons of gas or fly faster than 63 mph.

Ultralight pilots are prohibited from flying over cities, over large groups of people or

within five miles of an airport.

But an ultralight pilot doesn't have to be licensed — anyone who learns how can fly one.

That appeals to Willis' sense of thrift, and to his sense of adventure. The advent of the ultralight has given a large number of people a chance to fulfill their dreams of flying who otherwise may not have been able to afford it, he says.

"There are guys on fixed incomes, you know," Willis says. They can't afford the costs of being a licensed pilot, he says, nor can they afford to pay for the amount of gas most airplanes use.

Ultralights can go about 80 miles on six or seven gallons of gas, says Willis, which puts the cost at about \$2.50 an hour.

Even with the rules and the limited gas tanks, ultralight enthusiasts are able to get in as much flying as they care to, Willis says.

"We just get right with the program and go places," he says.

"We're doing the same thing these other groups (of airplane pilots) are doing — we're just not going as far."

Instead of taking a quick trip to Reno, Willis and his fellow ultralight pilots make trips up and down the Willamette Valley, stopping for lunch and gas in Corvallis and continuing on to Portland. This week they've planned an 80-mile trip to Roseburg.

A typical ultralight trip to Portland will take about three hours, Willis says. "But we play around a little."

A trip of that length requires at least three stops for gas. Since so many people have taken up ultralight flying, special airports have been set up and maps have been produced so that finding a place

to gas up is easy.

Willis says he became interested in ultralights several years ago when he was training race horses in Phoenix, Arizona. His horse sprained an ankle, so Willis had some spare time on his hands.

He was walking around the outskirts of Phoenix when he heard a noise resembling an overly loud lawnmower in the sky. Looking up, he saw his first ultralight.

"I always wanted to fly but it was out of my price range," Willis says. With nothing else to do, he stopped in at an ultralight dealer's store.

"Well, I bought one. I just had to try that."

Three years ago, he came to Eugene and started his own store, where he not only sells the craft but also teaches people how to fly them.

His operation is part of Eipper Aircraft, which produces the Quicksilver line of ultralights. As a seller and a trainer he goes through several air safety training programs, sponsored either by Eipper or by the Air Safety Foundation.

When asked about the safety of ultralights, Willis is candid.

"Anything mechanical that moves and is misused is gonna hurt you," he says. "But I've been flying for five years and you don't see any bandages on me."

There have been accidents and deaths involving ultralight craft, but those have been the result of "improper instruction or no instruction," Willis says. Most accidents have been determined to be caused by pilot error, he adds.

It doesn't take long to learn to fly an ultralight — only about 10 hours. After six hours of ground training, the student is ready to solo, Willis says. Four more hours of free flying and the student is usually proficient.

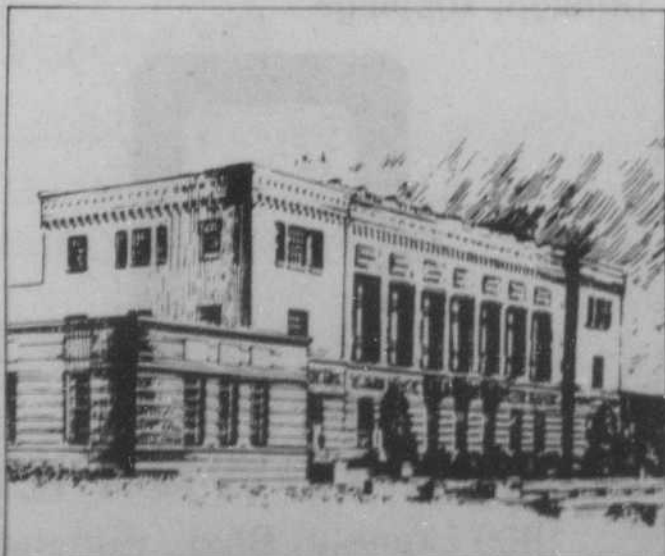
The craft Willis sells cost around \$5,500. He says he "starved" during his first two years in business, but this year the hobby seems to have caught fire.

He has already sold more ultralights this year than he did last year or the year before. And he sees continued growth for about another two years when the sport reaches its peak.

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