

BABY STEPS TO GREATNESS

BY MIKE TAYLOR

THE INAUGURAL KOKOMO BIPLANE FLY-IN was held June 26-27, 2020, at Glendale Airport in Indiana. The Kokomo airport ID is 8i3, with a lower case “i” for two good reasons. First, so as to not confuse it with the numeral one, but also to highlight the diminutive aspect of the aircraft featured at this gathering.

Hosted and organized by Michelle and Ron Beachy, EAA 1065894 and EAA 1053055 respectively, the Kokomo fly-in was held at their home-base airport. Both members of the Baby Great Lakes Biplane Group, the couple flies their very own Baby Great Lakes: a scaled-down version of the 2T-1A Sport Trainer biplane produced in the early years of the Great Depression era. Its greatness endures in a big way, here on a smaller scale.

The original was manufactured by the Great Lakes Aircraft Co. from 1929 to 1933. The company also produced civilian biplanes, floatplanes, and light bombers under contract to the U.S. Navy. Roughly 240 of the Great Lakes Sport Trainers were built.

Chris Hiatt, EAA 789584, of San Antonio, Texas, was one of the fly-in’s enthusiastic participants. He traded in a passion for Aeroncas, at least temporarily, for some biplane time. Chris was flying an Aeronca Chief at the time the Baby Lakes came along. The new arrival fit neatly into the hangar beneath the Chief. As more of his time and focus centered on the smaller aircraft, the Chief was sold. The Baby Lakes served to amp up his quest for adrenaline.

The aircraft has many known names, including Baby Lakes, Oldfield Baby Lakes, Baby Great Lakes, Super Baby Lakes, Super Baby Great Lakes, and Buddy Baby Lakes. There is a small collection of these Babys in the United States and a tight group of enthusiasts who share their knowledge of them.

Once Chris learned about the fly-in, he was set on tweaking and updating his example, N822CH. Every last minute was spent readying the aircraft to be trailered 1,200 miles northeast to Kokomo, a feat presumed far less tiring than traveling in a bumpy open-air cockpit solo and luggage-less.



Prior to attending, N822CH received new cowlings and had its wings re-covered. Chris has also managed to install a starter and new bungies while giving the airplane a thorough pampering.

Origins of the Baby Lakes are attributed to Barney Oldfield Aircraft Co., named for designer Barney Oldfield. Best summarized as “a scaled-down Sport Trainer,” the airplane uses steel frame tubing and spruce wing spars. It was intended as a one-off construction. However, due to the popularity of the model, plans were produced on-demand, and this led to marketing the homebuilt aircraft. Copies began to multiply.

While designed for the Continental A-65 and Volkswagen air-cooled aero boxer engines, Chris’ build performs like a rocket with its upgraded 145-hp Lycoming O-290G. It easily proved to be the fastest of the current crop of Baby Great Lakes. Thus, a world speed record was claimed last month — 130 mph in cruise in a Super Baby Great Lakes. Chris admitted that it wasn’t a real competition, therefore “top speed” was not determined. He was just so far out in front of the others, he surmised that it must be a record.

“Another record was set on Friday, the 26th of June 2020 ... [at] the largest gathering of our beloved tiny Baby Great Lakes biplane,” Chris said.

In addition to Ron and Michelle’s example and Chris’ Super Baby Great Lakes, Shad Bell, EAA 605627, of Centerburg, Ohio, dodged storms to attend in his Baby Great Lakes. The final attendee of the record-setting foursome was Corben Meyer, who flew in from Timber House Airport near Lafayette, Indiana, a short 40 miles west with his 65-hp Baby Lakes.

“Each of the planes is unique in several different ways, with none of them sharing the same landing gear setup,” Chris said. “Although the wind blew a constant 20-plus mph, Shad Bell demonstrated the aerobatic ability of these tiny biplanes in the hands of a skilled pilot.” *EAA*