

A Pilot's Perspective: Young Eagles

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Young Eagles is a program established by the Experimental Aircraft Association (EAA) to foster and encourage interest by youngsters in aircraft, piloting and all aspects of aviation. Before going further, I'd like to clarify one point: the word "experimental" which can cause some people to shudder, is a bit misleading and goes way back to the beginning of the organization. The word "homebuilt" is more accurate. The key point is that, whether they buy or build their plane, EAA'ers fly safe, tested aircraft that often are sold in kit-form by reputable companies. All these aircraft must meet FAA standards and are subject to FAA inspection and approval before they ever get close to a runway. In addition, lots of EAA pilots own and fly standard factory-built aircraft: Cessna, Piper, Beechcraft, Cirrus, Mooney, etc.

Since Young Eagles started in 1992, volunteer EAA pilots have flown over 2 million kids, at no cost to them or their parents. Many have been inspired to pursue further training, eventually qualifying for a pilot's license; some have followed their flying dream all the way to careers in military or commercial aviation. The last edition of EAA's SPORT AVIATION magazine had a story about Liz Birch, a young woman who now competes at the highest level in the U.S. National Aerobatics Championships. She was a Young Eagle kid, and credits that first flight with "lighting her fire" about flying. Outcomes like hers are exciting to hear about, and very rewarding to every Young Eagle pilot. Even if a kid never goes aloft again, it's a certainty that he or she will walk away from the airplane with a little better understanding of grassroots aviation.

Locally, Siskiyou EAA Chapter 654 has provided Young Eagle flights for many years, usually flying out of Montague-Yreka airport, and sometimes Weed. Summer works best, when schoolkids are on vacation. However, this also means we sometimes have to cancel and re-schedule because of reduced visibility due to wildfire smoke. As we all know, these conditions can persist for weeks on end, and each year seems to get worse. Another, and even more troubling issue, is declining Chapter membership and lack of sufficient aircraft. Given the "normal" turn-out of parents and kids on a Young Eagle day, we need a minimum number of planes and pilots to reasonably accommodate everyone. This has become a real problem, and to be perfectly honest we don't know yet whether we can pull it off this coming summer. Dave and Kristine Weld handle Young Eagle program coordination for the Chapter and have done so for many years. They, along with all Chapter members, will try very hard to make it happen!

It's hard to describe what a pilot feels walking out to the airplane with one, two or three excited youngsters who (in most cases) haven't flown in a small aircraft, or even in any aircraft before. Through them, you are re-living your own first experience. Sure, it might be a little scary, but it WILL be fun. You walk them around the plane, briefly pointing out and explaining propeller, ailerons, flaps, elevator, rudder, etc. and how to be safe

around an airplane. Then you buckle each one securely into a seat, show them how to communicate using a headset, and watch their eyes light up as it sinks in: Hey-I'm really going flying!

Things get very quiet during the takeoff roll, but once airborne, the chatter begins: "Awesome!" "Look at those little cows!" "I can see where I live!" "How high are we now?" "How fast are we going?" "How do you steer?" "Totally cool!"

Thankfully, although I'm prepared for it, I've never had a kid get airsick; never had one start to cry and want to go back to the airport; never had one misbehave or act-out. I do recall two youngsters who walked out to the airplane and then had a change of heart. They walked back to the waiting-area with mom or dad. They were quite young (age 8—17 is the approved age-range), but the next year they came back and went up for a flight.

After landing and taxi-in to the ramp, with the engine shut down, and parents walking out to take pictures, it's usually smiles all around as the kids climb out of the airplane. Over at the office, each one receives a handsome EAA certificate, signed by their pilot. A new batch of official Young Eagles has just been fledged.

(To learn more, you can access detailed information online at eaa.org/youngeagles.)