

AMERICAN CHAMPION SCOUT

# DELTA SCOUT

*Scoutin' out some big ol' ketfeesh*

BY WILLIAM L. GRUBER

**F**rank A. Pugh is a lifelong farmer who grows cotton, rice, beans, and milo on his 3,500 acres in Portland, Arkansas, an agricultural community about 30 miles southwest of the Mississippi River Delta town of Greenville, Mississippi. Pugh's main cash crop, though, is catfish (pronounced "ketfeesh" in these parts), which he and others in the region raise in large rectangular ponds that provide the only visual relief for miles around from the broad, flat landscape, except for the Big Muddy itself. ■ Like most farmers, Pugh relies on

PHOTOGRAPHY BY MIKE FIZER







Pugh with his new mount at his private, 2,000-foot airstrip. The Scout replaced his trusty Super Cub, in the background.



a good deal of machinery to get his work done. And like many in agriculture, one of his more important pieces of farm equipment is his airplane.

"I fly every day, somewhere," Pugh says as he surveys his catfish ponds from the comfortable offices of his business, Top Cat Fishery. "I fly every single day, weather permitting," he repeats for added emphasis.

Top Cat Fishery occupies the only two-story office building in Ashley County, Arkansas, and the second floor is surrounded by big windows that afford a panoramic view of Pugh's farm. Pugh's office provides a good vantage point from which to scrutinize the ponds, but his airplane offers a much better one. That's important to catfish farmers, because the most direct way to predict whether or not a specific pond of fish is "on flavor" is by the appearance of the pond itself.

It's a subjective judgment best made with the benefit of years of experience, but a general rule is that the darker and greener a pond appears, the more it will tend to be "off flavor." The lighter, browner ponds will contain fish that are "on flavor," or of the right texture and taste to be sold to the big processing plants in Mississippi and Louisiana. When catfish are harvested from a pond, using a large seine, a sample of two fish is sent to a "taste kitchen," where employees actually pop the fish into a microwave and then taste it, grading it by flavor on a standard scale. Only fish that makes the grade—that is on flavor—will be bought by the plants, which comprise the lion's share of the market for the catfish farmers' produce.

I flew over the ponds in Pugh's new American Champion Scout, and I can vouch for the fact that it is a lot easier to tell their color from the air than it is by standing on a muddy levee with the bright sunshine in your eyes, or even by looking out the big window in Pugh's second-story office.

For several years, Pugh used a Piper PA-18 Super Cub for his farm chores, but when he went looking for a replacement, he settled on the Scout. I flew the Super Cub during my visit too, and while it handled like a charm and I wished I could afford his \$40,000 asking price, I had to agree with his decision to go with American Champion. The Scout is a heck of a lot faster than the Super Cub, and its room and comfort leave no comparison with a

Cub. Besides, the Scout is brand-new.

Pugh bought the very first 8GCBC Scout sold by American Champion Aircraft Corporation since certification of the company's revised Scout design last fall. American Champion, which brought the old Bellanca Champion lineage back to life in 1991 (see "By American: The New Champion," October 1991 *Pilot*) and has since sold 61 of its redesigned Decathlons, certified the new Scout in September (a second model with larger fuel tanks got the nod in November) and now is at work on a revamped version of the 7GCBC Citabria.

Like the Decathlon, the Scout's main difference from its predecessor is its metal spar, which supplants the spruce used in Bellanca's taildraggers. According to Jerry Mehlhaff, president of American Champion, the Scout's metal spar was ground-tested through

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50,000 3-G cycles with no signs of fatigue, so it should prove a tough feature of this tough airplane. Other changes include ailerons extended to the ends of the wings, longer flaps, and a jazzed-up interior. Large tundra tires and a five-point harness are standard on this workhorse, as is the greenhouse window, and desirable options include aileron spades that greatly lighten the stick forces in roll. Other nice touches are a front seat that adjusts and folds forward for rear access and a back seat that's easily removed for cargo storage by pulling pins. The Scout seats two, tandem style, although Mehlhaff points out that two kids could be accommodated in the capacious back seat.

Roominess is Pugh's favorite feature in his new mount. Next comes fleetness. "I have been very impressed with the speed," he says, pointing out that a power setting of 24 inches at 2,400 rpm yields a 120-knot cruise. In the Cub, he says, "You might get 100





mph out of it, and that's on a nice day, good and washed."

Speed matters for Pugh's frequent work-related trips. "Every time you sell a pond of fish, you have to send a sample to a taste kitchen," he says. As passengers in Pugh's Scout, his samples are among the world's only flying catfish. The two taste kitchens are 40 miles by air or 60 by land, and 100 miles by air or 120 by land, respectively, so any aircraft proves a valuable asset. In addition, he uses the Scout to pick up tractor parts for the John Deere dealership he also owns and to get parts for his own farm machinery. When he needs to inspect the ponds up close, Pugh often will land right on the dirt levees in-between ponds. He also uses his airplane for regular trips to his hunting camp on the Mississippi and for VFR forays to New Orleans and Memphis, seldom venturing above 500 feet agl. Last year, he flew his Cub across the United States, to Wyoming and Canada (an experience that made him yearn for greater speed), and he has similar plans for the Scout.

Pugh got the full boat with his Scout, which he purchased for \$73,830 with 31 hours on the tachometer. His airplane, N101AC, was the company's showpiece at Oshkosh last year, and it has niceties like aileron spades, the optional 70-gallon tanks (35 gallons are standard), a full radio stack including Bendix/King nav/coms and transponder, a II Morrow Flybuddy loran, and a very pretty paint job.

"I like the handling and the takeoff and landing performance. I can land it in 400 feet," says Pugh. "And appearance—it's a super-sharp-looking airplane."

It is indeed a sharp-looking airplane. And with its long legs and big tires, it looks pretty imposing, too. Although the fuselage itself is quite similar in size and shape to the Decathlon's, its steel gear legs are each half a foot longer, the tundra tires add a few more inches, and the result is a utility airplane that stands tall on the ramp in an imperious nose-high attitude, seemingly ready to leap off the ground.

And all clichés aside, leap it fairly does. With two of us aboard and full fuel, we were off the ground at Lake Village (Arkansas) Municipal Airport practically as soon as I got the tail up. We were hauling skyward at 1,000 feet

per minute and the Scout wasn't even breaking into a sweat, although it was impossible to try the book speed for best rate of climb because we didn't know what it was. Pugh had yet to receive a check list, let alone a pilot's operating handbook, from American Champion, despite repeated requests—part of doing business with a small, family-run operation, I suppose. (Placarded limitations and a weight-and-balance sheet kept us legal.) Mehlhaff later told me the Scout's book climb rate is 1,420 fpm, although it seemed from our experience that you could do better than that, especially with one aboard and partial fuel. Pugh says he gets "an easy 1,200 to 1,500 fpm" flying by himself.

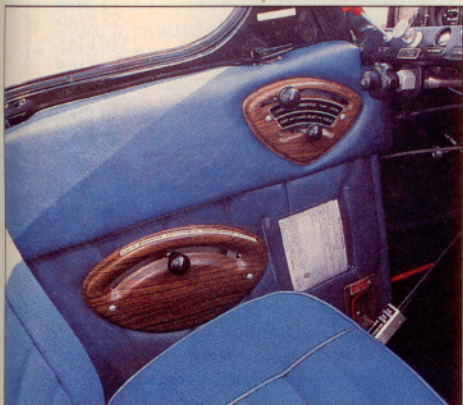
We didn't spend much time climbing, though, because we planned to make the flight the way local custom

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*Panel layout and equipment is basic and functional but more than adequate for Pugh's needs.*



demands: low and slow. The countryside, while possessing its own kind of beauty, is flat as a skillet. Tall structures and other airplanes are conspicuously absent (there's one tower nearby, but it's well known and well lit), so if you avoid the great blue herons, cormorants, and other winged denizens of the delta, you're pretty much assured of not running into anything. On the way over to Pugh's catfish ponds and private, 2,000-foot paved airstrip, I tried some Dutch rolls and steep turns. The spades assured relatively light stick forces for the big-winged Scout, although they were less so than in a Decathlon—certainly less than in a Decathlon with spades. After circling the ponds and discussing on-flavor versus off-flavor colors over the intercom, I climbed leisurely and then tried some stalls, which were quite docile, with any slight tendency toward a wing drop easily arrested by rudder. Unlike the Decathlon, the Scout is not approved for spins or aerobatics.

Flaps cause only a modest pitch



change, and the elevator trim is very responsive. Maybe too responsive, according to Pugh, who is used to cranking trim for dear life in his Cub. The Scout's trim lever is a knob on the left side, below the similar throttle knob, and it can be mistaken for the throttle by neophytes who fail to positively identify it. Pugh pointed out that a pilot who pulled back on the trim knob on final at a critically low air-speed, thinking he was pulling off the power, could be in for a real surprise. I did it once in a Decathlon, but with my right hand on the stick, I was able to immediately counteract the treachery of my left hand on the trim. It gets your attention, though.

Landings are straightforward, with adequate visibility over the nose (from the front seat), which is much appreciated in any tailwheel airplane. If you're used to the sight picture in a Decathlon, though, the Scout plunks onto the runway before it seems like the wheels should have arrived there. But that's the sort of adjustment, easily made, required for transition to any new airplane.

Pugh's experience with the Scout was still limited when we visited, steady rains having kept the airplane holed up in his private hangar. But he figures he gets about 11 gallons per hour out of the 180-horsepower Lycoming O-360, which spins a Hartzell constant-speed propeller.

All in all, Pugh sees the Scout as the perfect airplane for his needs. A 1,300-hour VFR pilot with no interest in an instrument rating, Pugh began flying in 1980, although his father was a pilot

and he grew up around aviation. Producing three million pounds of catfish a year, his farm boasts among the highest yields in Arkansas. At 34, Pugh is a very successful man, and his airplane plays a valuable role in that success.

Mehlhoff expects most Scout buyers to be well-heelled working pilots like Pugh, with a particular mission for the airplane in mind. Other suitable roles include pipeline patrol, border patrol, and fish-and-game spotting or law enforcement. As this story went to press, Mehlhoff had sent out 150 price quotes on Scouts, he had several orders and one new airplane ready to be delivered,

and he was working on several possible government contracts. In today's general aviation market, 61 Decathlons delivered is a respectable number, and the Scout promises to do well, too. Mehlhoff plans to debut the new Citabria (which will be renamed the Explorer, due to several design changes) at Oshkosh this year. As an entrepreneur, he's always thinking ahead.

As for Pugh, he's thinking ahead, too, to all the places he will fly in his new airplane. And in the Scout, he'll get there a lot faster than before, in comfort, speed, and style. For that matter, so will the catfish. □

**American Champion Scout 8GCBC**  
Base price: \$67,900  
Average equipped price: \$75,000

**Specifications**

Powerplant	180-hp Lycoming O-360
Recommended TBO	2,000 hr
Propeller	Hartzell 78-in diameter, constant-speed
Recommended TBO	1,500 hr
Length	23 ft
Height	8 ft 7 in
Wingspan	36 ft 4 in
Power loading	11.9 lb/hp
Seats	2
Cabin length	7 ft 2 in
Cabin width	2 ft 6 in
Cabin height	4 ft 6 in
Empty weight	1,350 lb
Gross weight	2,150 lb
Useful load	800 lb
Payload w/full fuel (35 gal)	590 lb; (70 gal) 380 lb
Fuel capacity, std	36 gal (35 gal usable)
Fuel capacity, w/opt tanks	72 gal (70 gal usable)
Oil capacity	8 qt
Baggage capacity	100 lb

**Performance**

Takeoff distance, ground roll	310 ft
Takeoff distance over 50-ft obstacle	650 ft

Max demonstrated crosswind component	17 kt
Rate of climb, sea level	1,420 fpm
Max level speed, sea level	132 kt
Cruise speed/endurance w/45-min rsv, std fuel	
@ 75% power, best economy	118 kt/9 hr
@ 65% power, best economy	114 kt/8 hr
@ 55% power, best economy	109 kt/7 hr
Max operating altitude	15,500 ft
Service ceiling	16,500 ft
Landing distance over 50-ft obstacle	1,205 ft
Landing distance, ground roll	420 ft

**Limiting and Recommended Airspeeds**

V <sub>X</sub> (best angle of climb)	61 KIAS
V <sub>Y</sub> (best rate of climb)	73 KIAS
V <sub>A</sub> (design maneuvering)	116 KIAS
V <sub>FE</sub> (max flap extended)	86 KIAS
V <sub>NE</sub> (never exceed)	141 KIAS
V <sub>SI</sub> (stall, clean)	43 KIAS
V <sub>SO</sub> (stall, in landing configuration)	34 KIAS

For more information, contact American Champion Aircraft Corporation, Post Office Box 37, 32032 Washington Avenue, Highway D, Rochester, Wisconsin 53167; telephone 414/534-6315; fax 414/534-2395.

All specifications are based on manufacturer's calculations. All performance figures are based on standard day, standard atmosphere, sea level, gross weight conditions unless otherwise noted.