

Fulfilling its promise

The Skycatcher is...catching on **BY DAVE HIRSCHMAN**



PHOTOGRAPHY BY MIKE FIZER



Sealed and locked in a shipping container in China, two Skycatchers at a time arrive in Wichita after a long journey by ocean, rail, and truck. Wooden crates beneath each airframe contain the Skycatcher wings and empennage. Once they are attached, the airplanes are almost ready for their first flights at Mid-Continent International Airport.



Wingless and painted in green primer, every Cessna 162 Skycatcher is a world traveler by the time it arrives at Yingling Aviation's loading dock at Wichita's Mid-Continent International Airport in central Kansas.

The two-seat trainers—and Cessna's first foray in the Light Sport Aircraft market—are built in China and made ready for flight there. But because of restrictions on civilian use of Chinese airspace and other considerations, the airplanes aren't flown there. Instead, they are disassembled, crated two at a time in a 40-foot container, and shipped to a U.S. port. Then they go by rail to Kansas City, Missouri, and are trucked to Yingling—a diversified U.S. aviation enterprise that's been a Cessna partner for more than a half-century.

The Skycatcher program has been dogged by slow development and production delays since it was first announced in 2006. But Cessna says it's on track to deliver 150 Skycatchers this year and accelerate production even more in 2012. The company has taken orders for about 1,000 Skycatchers.

"We believe we've turned a corner," said Doug Oliver, Cessna's director of communications. "We're very satisfied with the quality of Skycatcher production, and we're pleased by the quickening cadence of deliveries."

In a policy reminiscent of Henry Ford, who famously said that customers could choose any color Model-T they wanted "as long as it was black," all Skycatchers are delivered from China with exactly the same stock features. Then there's a menu of trim options that customers can choose from, but those are purchased separately through Cessna dealers.

"In order to keep the price where it has to be, there has to be standardization," Oliver said.

Making them fly

Once a shipping container arrives at the Yingling loading dock, two airframes (already assigned N numbers) roll out to the hangar floor.

Workers at Yingling attach the wings and tail surfaces, install a propeller, and are ready to test fly the still-green aircraft. Post-reassembly test flights typically last about one hour, and then each airplane flies 84 nm north to a Cessna facility in Independence, Kansas, for painting. Every Skycatcher gets a second test flight and a customer "acceptance



A Skycatcher rolls out of a shipping container and onto Yingling's loading dock at Wichita's Mid-Continent International Airport. After a long series of delays, the global production system that Cessna has created is operating smoothly, and Skycatcher deliveries are accelerating.



Jason Balman, a production test pilot, prepares for a first flight in a new Skycatcher (left). Sheldon Stoskopf (below left), a Yingling technician, installs a door. Todd Duncan and his father Robert (of Duncan Aviation, below) take delivery of a new Skycatcher that will be used to teach Todd's teenage children to fly.



flight” in which the buyer and a Yingling test pilot fly together. If all goes well, the process in Kansas takes about 38 man hours to complete.

“That number may seem low, but we’re consistently meeting it and in a few cases even beating it,” said Lynn Nichols, president of Yingling. “The aircraft production environment is new to us. But we’re constantly refining it and finding new ways to gain efficiencies.”

Yingling also installs customer and dealer options that include extras such as a second G300 display screen (MFD), autopilot, wheel fairings, an engine primer, and an airframe parachute. (A second G300 display is the most popular option.) Yingling also operates a Skycatcher in its flight training department that it rents for \$98 an hour.

“Wichita has been pretty hard hit economically in recent years, but the Sky-

catcher has kept our number of student starts surprisingly healthy,” Nichols said. “People like the fact that the airplane is new, has the latest technology, offers fantastic visibility, and that it has a stick.”

New model

The Skycatcher is an entirely new undertaking for Cessna in some ways—and it touches on some of today’s most controversial economic and political issues—globalization and outsourcing chief among them.

Cessna has traditionally kept the vast majority of its work in-house with mostly union labor. The company currently has about 8,000 total employees including 6,000 in Wichita, and there’s concern that, if the Skycatcher program succeeds, Cessna will follow by shipping skilled work on its many other aircraft models overseas.

However, Cessna officials say they aren’t contemplating any such moves, and the company is building Skycatchers in China because it’s the best way to meet its target retail price of \$112,250 for complete airplanes. Cessna has a long and storied history of “teaching the world to fly” since the 1940s, and the Skycatcher is the company’s effort





Wings and control surfaces are protected during the long voyage to Wichita inside sturdy wooden crates. The process is made for standardization, and custom paint, avionics, and airframe mods must wait until the aircraft arrive in the United States. Cessna's move to overseas production is designed to reduce Skycatcher costs and make modern flight training more affordable for a larger number of students.

to build a trainer for the next generation of student pilots.

"Our goal from the beginning was to get more people flying by lowering the cost of flight training," said Cessna's Oliver. "Flight training is part of our DNA. It's part of our pedigree. We had to find a way to make it more affordable to increase the number of pilots."

Company officials said they had to look abroad, and China won the competition.

Cessna's most recent trainer, the 152, went out of production in the early 1980s. And new Cessna 172s with inte-

grated Garmin G1000 avionics suites carry retail prices of about \$270,000.

The Skycatcher is meant to give new students a way to learn to fly at less cost, and hook them on Cessna products with Garmin avionics from the beginning. A new pilot today can step up through the Cessna product line from Skycatcher to Citation Mustang—and every airplane in between (172, 182, 206, Corvalis, 208) is likely to carry a similar avionics suite.

"We're making real progress at fulfilling Skycatcher orders," Oliver said. "And we expect to see our order book

grow again as the cadence of deliveries continues to accelerate and people get accustomed to seeing these airplanes in the field. All indications tell us it's going to be a very popular airplane."

In the field

John Sterling, operations director at Downtown Aviation at Gen. DeWitt Spain Airport in Memphis, Tennessee, said the Cessna 162 Skycatcher is attracting new students who come specifically to become sport pilots.

"They came to us because they heard about the Skycatcher and they wanted to pursue the sport license," Sterling said. "It's definitely creating demand."

Downtown Aviation took delivery of its Skycatcher, serial number 11, in September 2010, and the airplane logged about 200 hours of dual instruction in its first four months of operation. Downtown Aviation charges \$112 an hour for Skycatcher rentals, compared to \$87 an hour for a Cessna 152 and \$149 an hour for a 2005, G1000-equipped Cessna 172.

"We've had Cessna 150s and 152s in our fleet for years and our costs on them are extremely low because the airplanes are paid for," Sterling said. "We've had some preliminary discussions about possibly selling the 150s and 152s and buying more Skycatchers. But we really want to get at least one full year of operational experience with the Skycatcher under our belts before we make a decision. If we could get our costs on the Skycatcher down to the level of our 152s, we would have bought several Skycatchers."

So far, Sterling said the Skycatcher and its new Continental 0-200 engine have held up well to the rigors of the training environment. Other than a weak plastic ring on the oil door fastener, the airplane has been completely trouble-free, he said. And pilots seeking to learn to operate the complex avionics suites in integrated G1000 systems have begun flying the Skycatcher and its far simpler G300 first.

"Several of our customers have made the transition from G300 to our 172s and 182s with the G1000 system, and they do so without any difficulty," Sterling said. "The operating logic behind the two systems is so similar that it makes the transition much easier, and there's less frustration and less expense." **ACPA**

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