

# CESSNA

FLYER

VOL 11 ★ ISSUE 10

OCT 2014

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10<sup>th</sup> Annual  
Gathering in Waupaca

It Works for Me:  
Handheld Peace of Mind

As Big as the Sky Itself:  
**RAMONA COX  
AND HER 206**

page

34





Photo: Ramona Cox

**IN** a remote canyon deep in the backcountry wilderness somewhere, the distinctive sound of a TSIO-520 Continental engine can be heard as a TU206 Turbo Stationair weaves its way around one blind turn, and then another, before dropping into a remote grass strip and taxiing up to the other planes and pilots already camped there.

The scene is not unlike any other backcountry arrival, when a large, sturdy airplane loaded to the hilt with gear is “manhandled” right down onto where the numbers would be... if backcountry strips had numbers. But this Turbo Stationair has a giant clue right on its nose: big red lips, to signal to the other pilots that there is no man on board, and the only handling being done is by a female pilot with a quirky personality, an infectious attitude about flying, and a surprisingly diminutive frame.

When Ramona Cox, known in aviation circles as “Skychick,” flies alone into these backcountry strips, the eyebrows usually start raising about the time she climbs out and begins unloading enough equipment to make you think she must be the favorite customer of an REI store somewhere.

At five feet even and 97 pounds soaking wet, Cox might not look like the

Central Casting version of a backcountry pilot. She needs field-approved extensions on top of the factory Cessna pedal extensions just to swing the TU206’s big rudder, and it’s not uncommon for the three aviation-approved seat cushions she uses to see over the panel to fall to the ground as she leaps down.

But people who make the mistake of judging Cox by her size alone quickly learn that while the package might be small, inside lives a larger-than-life aviator who is living the flying experience very few of us get to enjoy.

While we all use our airplanes for different reasons, Cox uses hers to let no day escape without chasing after each precious morsel of flying joy it possesses. To her, the next 24 hours is another opportunity to put the frantic pace of the Los Angeles area behind her and point those big red lips on the cowl of her plane at another slice of backcountry heaven.

“Ramona may be physically tiny,” says Shelley Siracusa of Austin, Tex., one of the many friends Cox has made in the aviation family, “but her strength and personality are as big as the sky itself. Relentlessly positive and sociable, she is the life of any party—and usually the organizer.

“She’ll fly into any airport, even challenging, isolated backcountry strips where

a missed approach due to moose on the runway is not uncommon. Sparkling with self-confidence, coupled with a genuine interest in other people and their stories, I suspect that the only places she’s ever left without making a new friend are places where there simply weren’t any other humans. And even then, she probably charmed the local grizzly bear population.”

Cox subscribes to the theory that the sky is truly genderless. As Siracusa explains, there is room in that sky for a skilled pilot that doesn’t happen to look like a lumberjack. “One time at the Burning Man festival, I was struggling just to stay hydrated, and I saw Ramona emerge from a tent under the wing of her airplane, looking fresh as a daisy, perfectly coiffed, made-up and manicured, dressed in a fantastic outfit, with gifts to give and effervescent laughter announcing her arrival.

“She always has endless aviation stories to tell, and has both the piloting skills and the toughness to rival any male pilot. She can hang with all of them, but remains undeniably feminine and charming. A rare bird, Skychick.”

Cox’s success at living her wonderful aviation life really has nothing to do with gender. It’s a factor, sure, but not the determining factor. “I would say that for me personally, being a part of the six percent





**Left:** Flight planning for the next day while at Memaloose Airport (25U). This public airport, elevation 6,706 feet, is located 10 miles southeast of Imnaha in Wallowa County, Ore.

**Above:** Fish Lake Airport (S92) in Idaho is Ramona Cox's favorite backcountry airstrip.

**Right:** Fish Lake, a U.S. Forest Service airstrip, has lots of wildlife to photograph—especially in early morning when the moose are frolicking in the lake.



of aviation that is female has not been a huge deal," Cox says.

"It might have opened a door or two for me, but the key to equality as a pilot is being friendly, smiling genuinely at others because you're happy and excited to be doing what they're doing, and being open to try new things and explore new territory. It's letting your inner child come out to play, and in the process, those around you—both men and women—feel safe to do the same."

**While we all use our airplanes for different reasons, Cox uses hers to let no day escape without chasing after each precious morsel of flying joy it possesses.**

As a member of an aviation family, Cox seemed almost preordained to end up as a pilot.

"I was influenced by my father, a fearless adventurer," explains Cox. "He flew and owned several aircraft including Stearmans, Stinsons, a T-6, a Buhl Pup and a Ryan PT-22.

"My father's enthusiasm for aviation gave my half-brother the flying bug and

he became a pilot in the Utah Air Guard. He retired from the guard as a lieutenant colonel and flew everything from B-25s to KC-135 air tankers.

"My father would take our family on camping trips, which I loved. He taught me to fish, and being a bit of a tomboy by nature, I was always happiest exploring the outdoors."

There was plenty of fun poked at Cox for being a girl who wanted to fly, and like most any pilot, she took the ribbing as just part of being in this community. "When my CFI finally said it's time for me to solo," Cox says, "I made several nice landings, but hadn't told my father that I was taking flight lessons, and was waiting to tell him after I soloed.

"So I headed to his house to surprise him and coincidentally, my half-brother—the Air Force pilot—was visiting from Utah. I told them the story of waiting forever to take off behind some KC-130s, and the family banter started.

"My half-brother said, 'Well...it takes time to clear the airways for 25 miles when they hear a female is going to fly.'

"Then my father added, '...and of course, the tower guys had to do 50 'Hail Marys'!"

"We laughed for a bit and my father glowed... I knew he was proud."

Along with flying her TU206 into any backcountry strip she can find, Cox has over 200 hours flying T-34 Mentors. The Mentor she flew had a Blue Angels paint job, and with a group of friends, she did formation demonstrations at airshows and at the Reno Air Races in the late 1980s.

"I earned a Wingman patch," [now called a FAST card], she said, "and the highlight of flying the T-34 was formation fly-bys during the warbird formations at EAA Airventure Oshkosh. During this time, there were only a few women doing formation flying: Julie Clark in her T-34, Sue Parish who flew a pink P-40 Warhawk... and me."

Back then, the occasional comment by another pilot was waved off by Cox without so much as a second thought, because when you are living a flying life this grand, there is no room for any nonsense like being judged on flying skills simply because of gender. And when you consider why she flies in the first place, you see that it means absolutely nothing.

"My mother was diagnosed with cancer when I was six years old," Cox explains, "and when she passed four years later, I experienced a distinct revelation that there were no guarantees in life.



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From that day forward, I made a point to enjoy each day as much as possible and not let fear get in the way of enjoying life.

"After she passed, my father took custody of me and my life changed. He was a positive and inspirational man who taught me that I could accomplish anything I wanted as long as I put the desire and energy into it.

"I went from being a very shy, introverted child to an outgoing teenager and adult. By setting out specific plans of action and methodically taking the steps to accomplish them, I took up skiing and became a top ski racer. I also took up scuba diving and videography, and have filmed schooling hammerheads in Costa Rica, mating mantas in Yap, sunken ships in Palau and sharks in Galapagos."

She extended that verve for life into flying after one ride in a very unique airplane. "While ski racing in 1984, a fellow racer and I were waiting for our turn at the starting gate. He mentioned that his job was building experimental airplanes and offered me a ride in his plane, a Rutan-designed Long-EZ.

**There is room in the sky for a skilled pilot that doesn't happen to look like a lumberjack.**

"At the airport, I eyed his little machine—which looked like something out of a 'Star Wars' movie—and climbed into my seat. Once airborne, he let me take the stick and feel the sensation of piloting the aircraft. Looking out of the Long-EZ's clear canopy, I felt like a bird and was instantly hooked.

"The following week I signed up for ground school at UCLA and was soon flying a 152."

Those flight lessons of course ended with a pilot's license, which Cox uses today to live life like there is no tomorrow. Because the last thing this lady wants is to find herself asking "what if?"

"When I was in my early twenties," Cox explains, "I created a visual goal book which I filled with photos from magazines. It depicted my goals and dreams and I starting systematically setting the plan of action to accomplish them.

"Part of that book included a section on aging and included things like a woman in her nineties that led backpacking trips for youth. I realized that the saddest thing for me would be to end up

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**Above:** Ramona Cox's TU206 is now ADS-B compliant with a new Garmin GTN 750 touch screen GPS Nav/Com MFD and a GDL 88 UAT.

**Right:** During an Aviation Day for Kids at Torrance (Calif.) Airport (KTOA), students loved to sit in Cox's plane. Most of the kids were her size or taller, and they could reach the rudder pedals due to her pedal extensions, and see over the panel using her three pillows.

**Below Right:** It would take days for a hiker to walk in to Shafer Meadows (8U2) in Montana, because the airstrip in the middle of 1.4 million acres of wilderness.

**Below:** Seat cushions are on Cox's mandatory list—she can't see over the panel without them.



Photo: Ramona Cox

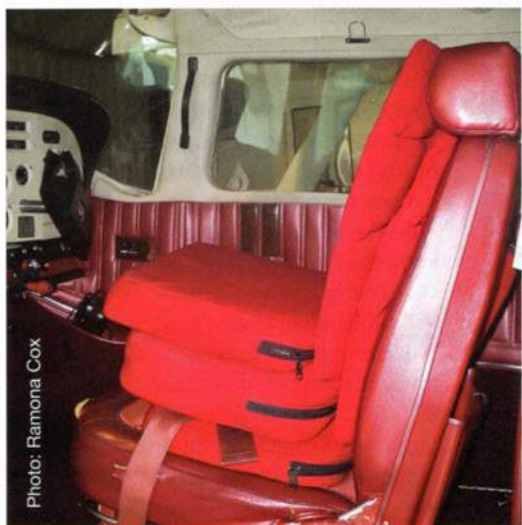


Photo: Ramona Cox



Photo: George Kounis





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in the rocking chair with the 'shoulda-woulda-couldas.'

"My 'dream goal' photo had a woman standing next to a plane wearing a beautiful lace dress—I picked it specifically because my goal has always been to maintain my femininity despite the fact that I was participating in a male-dominated activity. That's also why I put the big red lips on the front of my aircraft."

She started really checking off some of those goals not long after moving in next door to Clay Lacy at the Pine Mountain Lake airpark. Anyone that knows Lacy—a highly successful and motivated aviator—knows hanging around with him means going full-immersion into his aviation world. And when someone like that is your next-door neighbor, you can expect great things to happen.

"I was introduced to backcountry flying when Clay invited my friend and me to visit the place he owned on a grass airstrip at Pistol Creek, Idaho. It was my first time flying the backcountry, and the moment we landed, I could see that this type of flying resonated with my soul.

"After spending a couple of days at Pistol, we headed to Moose Creek where we camped and I was hooked. Just like the backpacking I had done years earlier, I felt at home in the wilderness."

And when Cox talks wilderness, she means it. "With my plane, I can get to remote destinations quickly. As an example, Shafer Meadows (8U2) is an airstrip in the middle of 1.4 million acres of wilderness.

"It would take days to walk in, and pamphlets at the ranger station on the field are titled 'Encounters with Grizzlies' and 'Living with Mountain Lion,' and there is signage on the field that specifically tells you to avoid leaving food in the plane."

In her day job, Cox is a salesperson for MotoArt, a company that, according to Cox, saves aviation history by recycling military and commercial aircraft parts into functional furniture. She also does an enormous amount of writing for her SkyChick.com site, where she has photos of backcountry airstrips with recommendations for air-camping gear.

So how could she possibly find time to leave the office to go play in the backcountry? She takes the office with her.

"The fantastic backcountry airstrips I love so much are all far away from my home airport in Torrance, Calif. (KTOA)," Cox says, "so I had to figure out how to run the technology I needed without electricity, Wi-Fi or standard internet connectivity.



"After much research, I accomplished that goal. My remote office means having a cell phone that works in cities during fuel stops, a satellite phone which works virtually anywhere, a small portable laptop and printer, and solar panels to charge everything, with extra batteries that could be charged and used to power my devices during overcast or stormy days," Cox explains.

"One of the goals was to make sure that everything I bought could be powered by solar. So lanterns, flashlights, cell phone, computers all need to use a 12-volt plug or work with an inverter."

A recent major upgrade to her Stationair's panel has given Cox even more flexibility in flight, and the new avionics may even lead to her finishing up her instrument rating.

"I'm very excited about my new panel!" she told me. "The two big new items are the Garmin GTN 750 touch screen GPS Nav/Com MFD, and a GDL 88 universal access transceiver. Collectively, they provide 2020 ADS-B compliance. I now have ADS-B In datalink technology for subscription-free weather including NEXRAD, METARs, TAFs, SIGMETs, AIRMETs, TFRs and more."

Ramona Cox has carved out the kind of aviation life that defines what General Aviation is all about. Flying is about freedom, and with private airplanes, that freedom means beginning the day in an office in L.A., and eating freshly-caught trout taken from a glistening stream in a backcountry airstrip for dinner.

This tiny pilot with a friendly personality is proof that in our genderless sky, it doesn't matter if you're a man or a woman, big or small. The exhilaration of flying is available to anyone who has the motivation to turn goals into accomplishments.



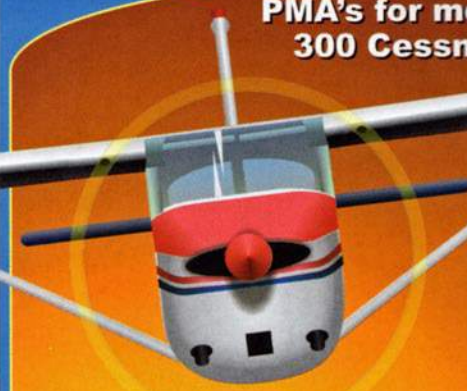
*Dan Pimentel has worked in journalism and graphic design since 1979, and is the president and creative director of Celestiel Daniels Advertising and Design (celestiedaniels.com). He's an instrument-rated private pilot and has been writing the Airplanista Aviation Blog (airplanista.com) since 2005. You can find him on Twitter as @Av8rdan. Send questions or comments to editor@cessnaflyer.org.*

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