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"The Albatross Lady"

Julie Fetcko and her flying yacht



Photo by Will Jones

BY THOMAS F. NORTON
GENERAL AVIATION NEWS

Her name is Julie Fetcko, but those who have met her at air shows call her "The Albatross Lady." She and her husband, John, own and fly the spectacular Grumman Albatross of that name, turning up at air shows and fly-ins all across America, summer after summer.

They bought the Albatross as a "flying motor home" to live aboard and travel the Americas, Julie Fetcko says, "and we did that for three or four months each

summer. Then we started going to air shows," where the big Grumman attracts a lot of attention.

"We can't go to an air show, or even land on a lake, that it isn't a zoo around us," Fetcko says with a big grin. A real estate agent when not flying, she enjoys meeting and talking with people and thinks it "great fun" that the Albatross is so admired.

"Now we contact the air shows," she says. Indeed, she and John spent the entire summer of 2006 at air shows on weekends and camping on lakes during the rest of the week.

Most of their itineraries have been to places between the midwest and the east coast, although one summer they flew to Washington State, where the airplane spent a month at Boeing Field's Museum of Flight while the Fetckos went on a cruise to Alaska. While in Washington "we became a performing act for the Budweiser hydro-



Photo by Will Jones



Photo courtesy Julie Fetcko



A FLYING WINNEBAGO: The Fetckos, who log about 200 hours in the Albatross, often camp on lakes during air show season. Their constant companion is Widgeon (right), who guards the plane.

plane races," she said, giving spectators the added thrill of seeing a big, low-flying amphibian in addition to watching very fast speedboats.

Julie and John log about 200 hours a year in the Albatross, "mostly in the summer," they say. Albatross Lady Julie has been flying since 1991. She is rated for single- and multi-engine land and seaplanes with an endorsement for the big Grumman.

"What we really enjoy is traveling extensively in our flying Winnebago," she said. "It's so beautiful it even won Judges' Choice at Sun 'n Fun as the Best Flying Yacht in 2004."

The Fetckos sold a live-aboard boat eight years ago, retired, and moved to Florida from the Atlanta area. In Florida they discovered airparks and bought a place at the Eagles Nest Aerodrome and Seaplane Base in northeast Florida's scenic Putnam County. Eagles Nest is "a private fly-in community nestled among the pine and oak trees on lovely Lake Estella," Fetcko said with a real estate agent's zest for adjectives.

If that sounds like enthusiasm, it is. The Fetckos liked the place so much they bought out the developer. Julie got her real estate license, started selling, and now is involved with the development of five airparks in addition to marketing private airport properties. Today, she says, the couple's lives "center on aviation and include many exciting adventures."

Although both are rated to fly the Albatross, John more often is the pilot while Julie navigates – and pet pooch Widgeon guards the plane. She can "sniff her way across the country," says Julie. "When she senses the Florida humidity her nostrils flare and she knows she's home."

THE ALBATROSS

The Fetckos' Albatross was built in 1951, serving in the Air Force through the early '60s before going back to Grumman to be refitted for anti-submarine work, re-designated as an HU-16B-ASW. Only 37 of the ASW Albatrosses were built, fitted with search radar in the nose, a retractable Magnetic Anomaly Detector boom in the tail, a sonar buoy launcher

and hard points under the wings for bombs, depth charges, torpedoes or rocket pods. "Crews could not only find subs but destroy them as well," John Fetcko pointed out. The Fetckos' Albatross also served in the Chilean Air Force as part of a NATO exchange program during the cold war.

Julie and John finished a five-year restoration project on the Albatross after buying her from Ernie Martin of Sands Point, Idaho, who has owned several large amphibians, including a PB5-5A Catalina. All of the military gear has been removed and now the interior has a full galley with dinette, flushing head, shower with hot and cold running water, and sleeping accommodations. The airplane is "fully self contained, with a 110-volt APU and central heat and air conditioning," John said.

THE AIRPARKS

The five airparks Julie Fetcko is involved with are Eagles Nest Aerodrome and Seaplane Base, Massey Ranch Airpark, Ridge Landing, Mount Royal Airpark and Blue Ridge Flightpark, all in northern or central Florida. In addition, she's beginning to develop a specialized business selling private airports, at least one of which is as far away from Florida as Pennsylvania.

Eagles Nest, home base for the Fetckos, is in northeast Florida near the St. Johns River, in an area dotted with lakes. "Eagles Nest Aerodrome is a pilot's dream," Julie says, a "serene airpark where neighbors are drawn together by their common interest in aviation." Eventually it will be home to 30 families. So far, 25 lots have been sold and 14 houses built. Eagles Nest residents' flying interests vary widely,

she says, a comment supported by the airplanes based there, which range from the Albatross to a Tiger Moth on floats.

A homeowners association maintains the taxiways, the lighted and irrigated turf runway, and the common areas around the lake. "A lot of airparks have problems," Julie comments, "but we're very particular" about the satisfaction of residents. She offered a hint for keeping homeowners meetings on track: "Get a video camera." The taped meetings also make life easier for association secretaries when writing up minutes, she added. "Working from the tape assures accuracy."

The other big Fetcko project is Ridge Landing, eight miles south of Lake Wales, about midway between Orlando and Tampa. It's another part of Florida where lakes seem to be everywhere, as this writer can attest from his visits to the Bok Singing Tower, designed by his great-uncle, architect Milton Bennett Medary.

"We can't go to an air show, or even land on a lake, that it isn't a zoo around us."

— Julie Fetcko

Lake Wales is home to far more than the Singing Tower, with its mighty carillon and its gorgeous gardens. The area also offers many concerts and exhibits, workshops, a film series and a juried fine arts festival in addition to the charming Chalet Suzanne restaurant with its own fly-in airstrip.

Ridge Landing is, in a sense, a larger version of Eagles Nest, as Julie Fetcko describes it. Again, a substantial lake invites amphibians and float planes, and there are two parallel runways, one paved and one turf. Eventually there will be 99 lots, although a large part of the property is devoted to natural and wetlands areas, she says.

The Fetckos invite readers to "explore their dreams" at these and the other airparks they're developing, which they call "the real magic of Florida," although the magic carpet of their Albatross might be considered enchantment enough for anyone.

For more information: AlbatrossLady.com.

