

# Outdoor Indiana

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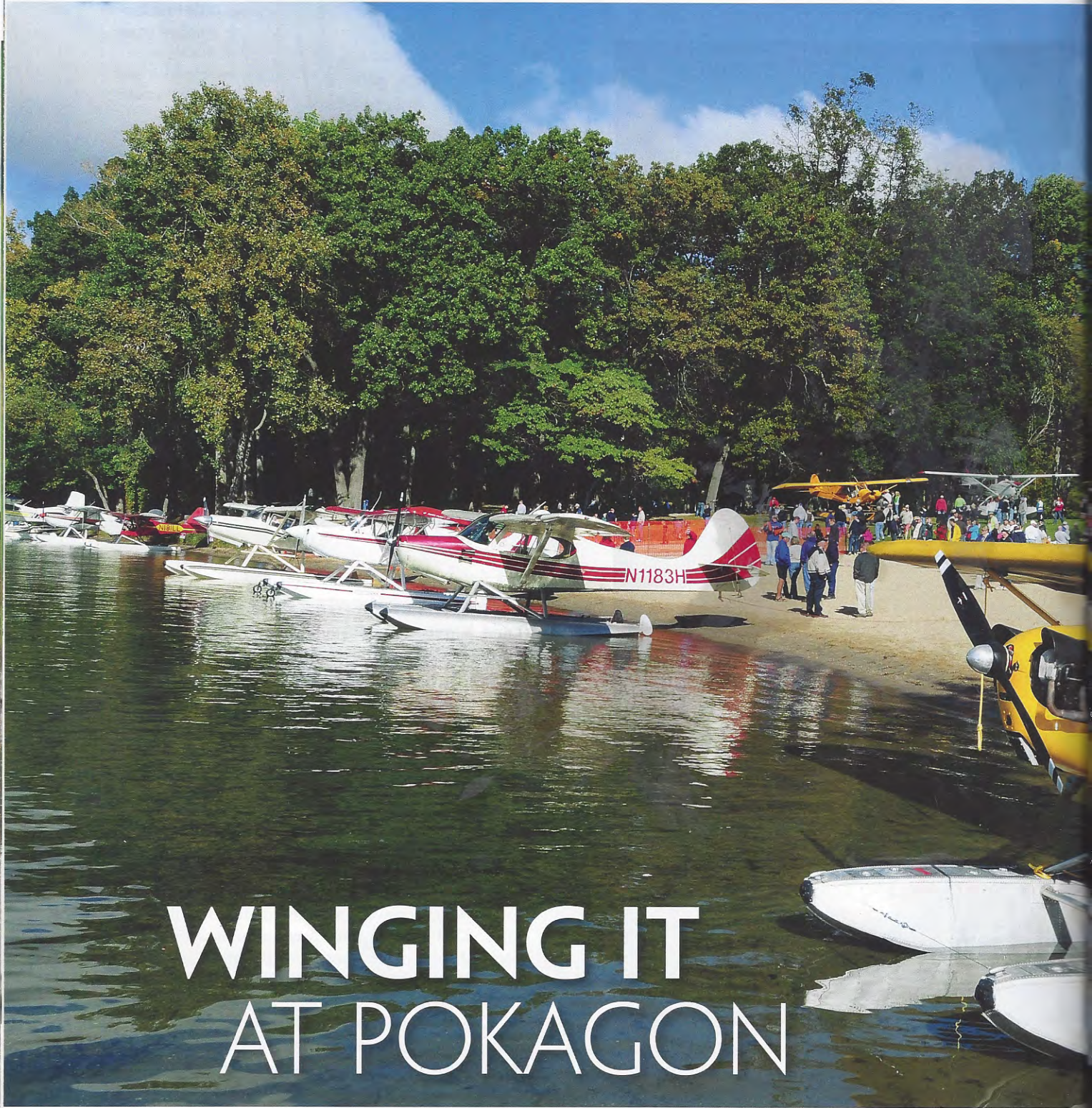
**RECORD FISH**

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# WINGING IT AT POKAGON





(Left) Seaplanes, pilots and spectators gather on the Pokagon State Park beach and lawn in northeast Indiana last September. (Above) A seaplane pilot secures and anchors her aircraft on the beach.

BY BEN SHADLEY  
PHOTOGRAPHY BY JOHN MAXWELL

**O**N FALL'S OPENING WEEKEND-A SPECIAL GROUP VISITS POKAGON STATE PARK'S POTAWATOMI INN. INSTEAD OF ARRIVING BY CAR OR BOAT THEY DROP IN FROM THE SKY—LITERALLY.

For the last eight years, pilots have been flying their seaplanes from all over the Midwest to gather at the well-known beach in front of the inn. They come for camaraderie with other pilots and to involve the public in the fascinating activity of taking flight from, and landing on, bodies of water more typically used by water sports enthusiasts and fishermen.

"The uniqueness about it is you have up to 30 seaplanes on the inn lawn and you have 2-year-olds all the way up to people in their 80s acting like kids, walking around checking out all these planes, and it's awesome," said Pokagon property manager Ted Bohman.

The event's concept is simple. Pilots land on Lake James in front of the inn, taxi to the beach and park on the lawn. Visitors come from far and wide to look, ask questions and watch the planes come and go.

"It's an amazing opportunity for the non-flying public to get close to airplanes, get close to pilots like they've never been able to before," said Randy Streb, organizer of the Indiana Seaplane Fly-In.

Streb started the fly-in to advocate for seaplanes and their place on Indiana's lakes. As the event became more well-known, more planes started showing up—and so did more people.





There's no official count, but Bohman said the morning of the fly-in is the busiest breakfast of the season at the inn, serving 650 to 800 people during the waking hours that day. The parking lot is crowded as well; vehicles typically end up parked along the road all the way back to the nature center.

The crowd includes all ages. Men, women, kids and entire families come out to get up close and personal with the flying watercraft.

"It's really a family event," Strebig said. "(They) make a day of it at the park and on the lake watching airplanes and hoping their ticket gets drawn so they can take advantage of getting a free ride over Lake James in a seaplane."

That's right. Attendees have a shot at going up in one of these flying wonders. All it takes is a little bravery and a lucky raffle ticket.

"We give away about 70 rides every year at the event. We just give everybody a raffle ticket and then we draw for rides on a random basis," Strebig said.

The rides are for fun, but the event also helps the Indiana Seaplane Pilots Association keep the lights on and further its efforts toward expanding the number of places where seaplanes can operate. Attendees are welcome to donate to support the organization and fly-in.

The day is a success for Pokagon as well, both monetarily and because it provides a one-of-a-kind experience to park visitors.





(Left) Lake James transforms into a busy air harbor while the Potawatomi Inn lawn serves as an air terminal during the Pokagon State Park Fly-In, held every year during September. (Top to bottom above) Fly-In visitor Jack Barth from Highland (left in cockpit) taxis to a lake takeoff with pilot Steve Whitney from Glenview, Ill. Seaplane equipment includes wading boots and a paddle. A spectator watches from an inn lawn chair.





"It's a good revenue day for us, very well visited," Bohman said. "And it's really a lot of fun, because you've got these planes landing on the lake, taking off, coming up on the lawn, it's very interactive."

"You can walk right up and look in the planes. The pilots are all very helpful, telling about what kind of restoration work they've done, what kind of improvements they've made. They take it upon themselves to explain (seaplanes) to all the visitors, especially the safety of landing on the lakes."

If the group's work to open more lakes in Indiana to seaplanes is successful, Hoosiers may see more of these aircraft on the lakes they enjoy. This could spark more interest in these machines,

and the men and women who fly them.

Visit Pokagon on Sept. 25 or 26 and you'll come home with a fill of seaplane fun, and, possibly, a flight over Lake James as part of the adventure.

Whether a trip to the fly-in includes a flight of fancy or just a tour of the aircraft, the experience will likely make a lasting impression. Take it from Bohman. He said the event, from his standpoint, "is simply outstanding."

For information on visiting the Indiana Seaplane Fly-In, go to [seaplanepilots.org/inspa](http://seaplanepilots.org/inspa) or call Pokagon at (260) 833-2012. ■

**Ben Shadley** is senior writer for *OI*.