

Local man takes to the air as a hobby

BY ALLEN PARKER

allen.parker@register-news.com

MT. VERNON — Steve Watts has a hobby of a different sort. But when asked about the intimidating pastime Watts describes it like a simple stroll along a smooth sidewalk.

“My dad had his license and I got the bug to fly,” Watts said of his itch to get his feet off the ground. “I got my 44-hours of pilot time in and came out to get a plane and none were available.”

That’s when Watts changed his focus to piloting an ultralight.

“I went to buy a Quicksilver

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Ultralight hobbyist Steve Watts stands next to his Quicksilver MX-2A outside a hangar at Mt. Vernon’s Outland Airport.

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PLANE

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MX (ultralight) in 1992 then bought this from a neighbor,” Watts said. “I rebuilt it and have put \$15,000 in it. I bought it for \$3,000 and I enjoy the heck out of it.”

At first glance an ultralight seems to be for those with a taint of daredevil running through the veins.

“I know of no fatalities with a Quicksilver. Fatalities come when a person is not paying attention,” Watts explained. “A Quicksilver MX-2A, which is the model I have, has a chute. If a pilot tears it up in dives, high speed turns or if the engine stalls the MX-2A has ballistic recovery (activated chute deployment). They put them on there to save a plane by setting it down easier.”

Watts described a story of how the chute deployment is activated when the ultralight has become damaged during flight.

“In testing the chute system a pilot tried to damage an ultralight while flying. He cut one of the four fly wires and

nothing happened. Cut a second and still nothing. Cut the third and the wing finally folded up. The pilot bailed out with his chute and then the system deployed its chute. They’re tough to bring down.”

Watts is currently classified as a light sport student and is working towards a light sport license. He said he flies at least once a week and up to as many as three times per week when weather is cooperative.

Enthusiasts of these small aircraft are also the beneficiaries of a system which requires minimal maintenance.

“You have to maintain engine oil. They’re easy to fly, you just have to pay close attention to your fuel,” Watts added.

He said the plane consumes approximately 4-gallons of gasoline per hour, depending on wind conditions. His model is equipped with a 6-gallon main tank and features two additional 4.5-gallon tanks used for back-up. It has a range of 300-miles in favorable conditions. He said flying against the wind would trim that number to 125-miles.

“It also depends on how the pilot is flying,” Watts said.

He said there are numerous enthusiasts in southern Illinois, including four individuals who store their ultralights at Mt. Vernon’s Outland Airport.

“There are three single seat ultralights and one two-seater, which is mine. Two of them are for sale,” he noted. “Jerry Burgess, Dan Settle and myself would be glad to put one together free for anyone who is interested. We love it.”

The cost of a new kit, Watts said, is in the \$22,000 range for a two-seater and \$12,000 for single-seat model.

The model Watts flies is powered by a 65-horsepower Rotax 582 Bluehead. It’s a two-stroke fuel injected en-

gine. He noted that other models have to have oil added to the gasoline.

“This one reaches a top speed of 55-miles per hour,” Watts said. “That’s pretty much a normal cruise. They reach heights of 1,500-feet but you can see more of the countryside at 500-feet. I’ve seen deer, turkey and even squirrel if you want to get that close to the ground.” 10/28/11