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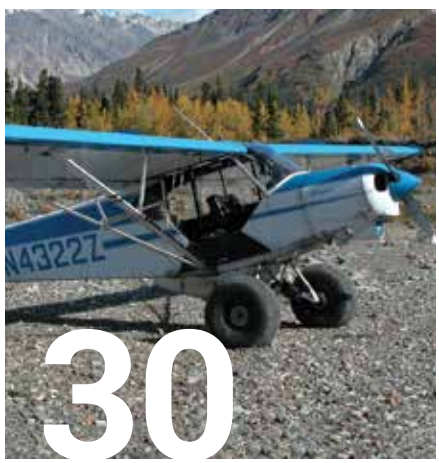

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Cover: **Piper PA-18-150 Super Cub. Photo courtesy CubCrafters.**

Fly Wisconsin: Completing Wisconsin's Airport Passport Program

MATTHEW MCDANIEL's quest to visit every public-use airport in Wisconsin—one passport stamp at a time—reveals how a quirky aviation challenge sparks adventure, camaraderie, and a deeper connection to the state's General Aviation community.

The day dawned blustery and overcast. I left the house at 0730, intending to be airborne no later than 0830. My main mission involved the delivery of aircraft parts in advance of my mid-summer annual and required crossing Wisconsin from my base in Racine (KRAC), in the southeast corner, to Boyceville (3T3) in the western part of the state.

Departing Racine's Runway 32, I took up a nearly straight-out course to the northwest. Initially, I stayed low, below both the gray overcast and the outer shelf of Milwaukee International (KMKE) Class C airspace. This routing avoided the nearby Waukesha (KUES) Class D, as well as the Madison (KMSN) Class C, about 45 minutes later.

My initial destination was not 3T3, however. Rather, my first stop would be a turf runway, sprinkled with gravel that hasn't been replenished in 30 years. This formerly private airport is known simply as Elroy (60C).

As I progressed northwest, the clouds began to break up sooner than forecast. The headwind limited my groundspeed to two-digit numbers. The ride was only light turbulence, and sightseeing was picturesque as spring transformed the brown landscape into varying shades of green and yellow. With every westward mile traveled, the gray skies grew brighter and bluer. Maybe today could be more productive than originally anticipated, after all.

Your passport to adventure

Wisconsin was not the first state to initiate an airport passport program. Nor is it the most recent to do so. Many states now have such programs administered by the corresponding state's Department of Transportation (DOT), some aeronautical commission or board, or private aviation organizations.

Inside these airport "passports," individual blocks represent every public-use airport in a given state. Each airport is issued a unique rubber stamp (with the airport's identifier in the stamp design) and an ink pad. Pilots land, locate the stamp, and mark the appropriate block within their passport. Such programs encourage pilots to explore and patronize their state's airports.

Not only does this often provide a specific mission to fly, it also helps improve skills and proficiency as pilots are forced to prepare for and deal with varying terrain, non-standard patterns, all manner of runway surface conditions, unique obstructions, and runway lengths and widths ranging from giant to tiny.

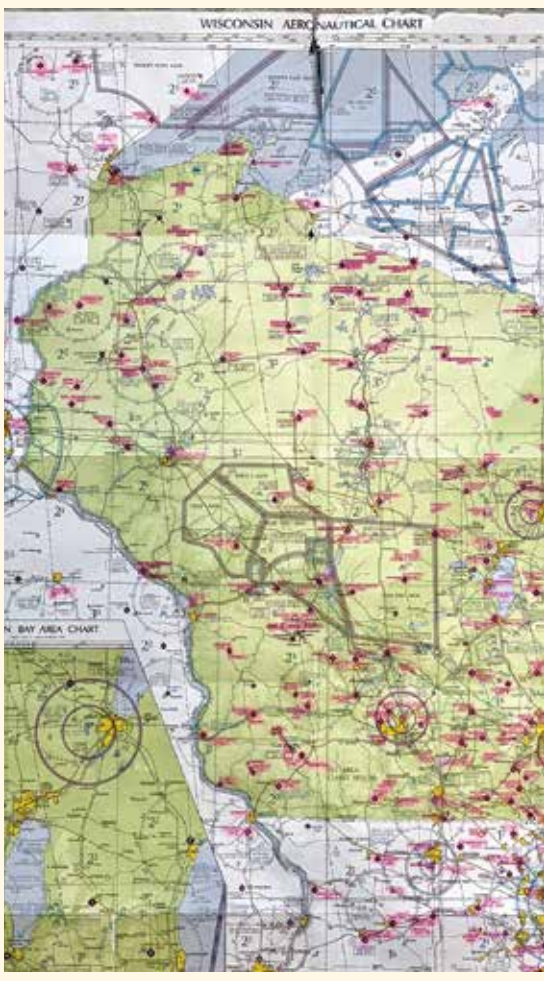
Of course, it also boosts airport operational counts, which can help the airports maintain funding. That can sometimes be the difference between a smaller airport remaining operational or closing.

How and when you collect your stamps is totally up to you, however. One or two airports a day, epic multi-airport missions, or even multiday collecting trips are common. The point is to have fun, enjoy the adventure, and explore the airports and towns of the state.

I found that what suited me best in my explorations of Wisconsin was not to be too rigid in my approach. Instead, I simply took each day as it presented itself.

Ahead and behind the curve

In 2006, a close friend and I landed at every paved, public-use airport in the state of Wisconsin (plus, with specific permission, one private airport and one military base). We did so all in one day, landing at 104 airports over the course



of about 17 hours. While the flight set an official U.S. National aviation record, it was the charitable fundraising component of the project that still gives me pride in the accomplishment today. Counting those landings toward the passport program was not an option, however. The rules clearly state that airport visits must occur after the inception of the program, and no retroactive credit may be applied.

Nonetheless, when the Fly Wisconsin Airport Passport Program first "went live" in September 2017, I registered immediately. However, my attempts to collect airport stamps were almost always foiled by the very thing that took me to so many Wisconsin airports: my work.

Stopping to collect the airport stamp was almost always impractical because I was providing instruction, and my client's training needs always took priority over an otherwise unnecessary full-stop landing and shutdown. So, my passport remained almost empty until my life entered a new phase.

Winged versatility

In the summer of 2023, at the age of 53 and with almost 22,000 hours in my logbook, I bought my first airplane, a tailwheel-converted Piper PA-22/20 Pacer

(see "Setting The Pace: 2,000 Miles in a 1958 Pacer" in the April and May 2024 issues of *Piper Flyer* and "My First Year with a Piper Pacer" in the November 2024 issue). With the Pacer came the realization that I finally had unlimited access to an aircraft with the versatility to operate to and from every public airport in the state, from the three major Class C airports, to the smallest and most obstructed grass strips.

Being based in the southeast corner of the state meant that any airport outside the southeast quadrant was a fairly long flight to get to (at a typical 100 ktas cruise speed). Thus, grouping the more distant airports made the most sense. Yet, I didn't want to strictly *collect for the sake of collecting.*

I also wanted to collect as opportunities arose. One such opportunity was traveling across the state to attend my daughter's many college music and theater performances, or to bring her to and from home for holidays.

Often, I was solo one-way on those trips, allowing me to land at several airports along the way to collect stamps. That tactic required a variety of routes to be taken, which broke up the monotony of what would otherwise have been many repetitive two-plus-hour straight-line flights.

Sometimes, I'd only collect an additional stamp or two along the way. Other days, I had more spare time and collected as many as seven stamps. Of course, seasonal limitations played into my collecting too, with (for example) turf runways passed over until dryer conditions prevailed or sticking to the better-maintained airports when winter snows and closure NOTAMs existed at some lesser-used airports.

For efficiency, any time I could combine stamp collecting with another mission that I had on my schedule anyway, I did. When my schedule and acceptable weather coincided, I'd head to specific sections of the state and check off a handful of airports. There were also social missions with fellow stamp collectors, where two or more aircraft would travel, stop, stamp, and sometimes, eat, together.

In fact, the socialization quickly became my favorite aspect of the program. Even on solo missions, I'd often hear a familiar voice or N-number over the radio. A brief exchange would usually include, "You out stamp collecting again?" I'd reply in the affirmative and receive well-wishes for the mission ahead.

Sometimes, a request for a report on the mission just completed would follow. On more than one occasion, impromptu loose formation flights followed these exchanges as flying buddies would join forces and go collecting together.

Socialization happened online, as well. Fly Wisconsin has a social media presence where pilots gather to share information on anything related to General Aviation news or happenings in Wisconsin. However, its original intention and still-active mission is to aid stamp collectors by exchanging information on airport conditions, stamp locations, access codes, fuel availability, nearby restaurants, etc.

Each airport is issued a unique rubber stamp (with the airport's identifier in the stamp design) and an ink pad. Pilots land, locate the stamp, and mark the appropriate block within their passport.

After my most significant multi-airport missions, I would post reports detailing obstructions to be aware of, non-standard patterns, challenging runway conditions, and just about anything of note that I thought my fellow stamp collectors would find helpful. Such posts by others had helped me in my collecting journey, and I tried to pay that forward.

The final countdown

By early 2025, I had only 17 Wisconsin airports left to visit (eight paved and nine turf). While I was enjoying the experience immensely, I'm a completest by nature. I like to finish what I start.

A longtime friend and fellow stamper and I combined forces to collect the eight remaining paved airports. Using his Cirrus SR22, we flew to north-central Wisconsin on an overcast and sometimes rainy (but still VFR) day in April 2025. Upon our return, I had a stamp in my passport for every paved runway in the state, and he wasn't far behind.

Five days later, I was solo and back in my trusty Pacer, which was fresh out of a 100-hour inspection and ready to go. My planned mission was the aforementioned trip to Boyceville, via the elusive Elroy airport (60C). In an earlier trip to collect airport passport stamps in the area, I'd missed Elroy.

While it is on the current Sectional Chart as a public-use airport, it was not on the older Wisconsin State Aeronautical Chart that I'd been using as a basic guide for organizing my passport missions. Nor was it in my passport booklet, which had been issued prior to Elroy's conversion from private to public.

The blustery winds made for a sporting final approach into 60C, as wind spilled over the bluff north of the runway, creating mild rotors that did not dissipate until below the tops of the trees that line the grass/gravel strip.

Once, several aircraft were based at the airport. Today, the hangars are dilapidated, and the planes are all gone. Yet, the airport was tranquil, the terrain beautiful, the owner friendly, and a sign explained you've arrived at "Elroy Airport, 944 feet above sea level."

Pictures taken, I was soon northwestbound again. Passing north of the LaCrosse (KLSE) Class D, I crossed the Mississippi River for a touch-and-go in Winona, Minnesota (simply because the beautiful river bottom airport beckoned me). Turning northward on departure, my next stop was Menominee (KLUM). Having visited before, their attractive fuel price enticed me back. From there, it was a five-minute flight at pattern altitude into Boyceville (3T3) to drop off my new rudder and visit with fellow aviation nuts.

The weather had slowly improved all morning and was now nearly perfect. A pilot I met at 3T3 was flying an airplane I'd instructed in 30 years prior. He and I departed together and took some aerial photos, which left me very close to Barron (9Y7), a well-maintained grass strip with many fine hangars. I stopped and collected my stamp.

Due north of me was another grass field known as Nest of Eagles (1H9). It was too close to resist. I made the short hop and enjoyed the solitude of the field for a moment, while contemplating my next move. I was very far northwest by then and had collected three of my eight outstanding passport stamps. It was still just early afternoon, and I was not expected to be anywhere all day.

On impulse, I decided today was the day—finish the program now, or it might

take me all summer to get back to NW Wisconsin to try again!

Going further north would soon put me over the Wisconsin Northwoods, a sparsely populated and heavily wooded area where a forced landing could lead to severe consequences. While I had my cellphone and a SPOT satellite communication device, I decided to let someone know where I was anyway. So, I texted a fellow stamp collector, gave him the rest of my intended route, and told him to expect me to check in from each airport. If I didn't, I told him, start searching.

With that, I departed for Eau Clare Lakes (5G4), then Iron River (Y77), and Cornucopia (23W). The latter is the northernmost public use airport in Wisconsin, on the south shore of Lake Superior. Run by the Recreational Aviation Foundation (RAF), it's an inviting strip with nice amenities considering its remote location.

Leaving Cornucopia, I was headed toward home, but with four stops remaining (three for stamps, one for fuel). Next was Boulder Junction (KBDJ), one of the only Wisconsin airports where the stamp doesn't reside on the field, and prior arrangements are required to access it. Since I'd not made those arrangements, I elected to just do a touch-and-go and take photos/video to prove I'd been there.

This two-runway turf airport is big, but the towering trees surrounding it make you feel as though you're descending into a subterranean runway. Past KBDJ, I stopped into Eagle River (KEGV) for fuel.

Unknowingly, I'd saved the most challenging strips for last. Three Lakes (40D) is a near-perfect strip. Apparently, animals think so too! Turning final, I could clearly make out a small herd of deer grazing in the touchdown zone. As I approached to do a low pass to scare them back into the woods, I also noted a flock of wild turkey, a pair of cranes, and a large gaggle of geese. My pass overhead scared them all off the runway, and I landed and departed uneventfully.

Finally, all that remained was Piso (7P5). A little strip with a little name, which I'd been warned by a fellow

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stamper and Pacer owner, was "no joke." It is long enough on paper, but with significantly displaced thresholds on both ends due to tall trees surrounding the runway. *(The Piso runway is listed as 2,300 feet, but with a 420-foot displaced threshold landing to the south, and a 300-foot displaced threshold landing to the north. There are also tall trees in close proximity to the runway, per the Chart Supplement.—Ed.)*

My landing was uneventful, but utilized almost all the available runway. With one last stamp in my passport, I departed using my best short/soft field technique and climbed at V_X to clear the trees. Making a downwind departure, I headed for home.

It was then that I became aware that I'd been looking at Rib Mountain all day (Wisconsin's highest point, located almost exactly in the center of the state), yet I'd never been closer than 50 miles away. For the next hour or so, I cruised in smooth air with a slight tailwind as I watched the sun set behind Rib Mountain and Lake Winnebago, off my right wing.

I received flight following from Green Bay Approach, then Milwaukee. Transitioning the Milwaukee Class C along the Lake Michigan shoreline, the last red glow of evening civil twilight faded away. I keyed up the pilot-controlled lights at Racine and touched down exactly 12 hours after I'd departed.

I'd made 14 landings (nine at turf airports) in 9.2 hours of loggable time. It had been 21 months since I'd bought the Pacer and started actively adding stamps to my passport.

Making it official

For me, the program included 128 airports. Several had closed or gone private, but only after I'd collected the stamps (any stamp collected can be counted, even after subsequent removal from the program).

Fortunately, several private airports had become public, as well. One public airport was sold to a developer and closed only two weeks after I'd visited. Another had since been made private, but the gracious owner invited me to land and collect the stamp, since I had

the slot for it in my older passport.

More lucky timing allowed me to use one of the spare slots at the back of the passport for an airport which had started private, briefly became public, then quickly returned to private status.

Unsurprisingly, the net change in publicly accessible airports since the program began is negative. At the start of the program in 2017, the number was 127 (102 paved, 25 turf). As of this writing, it is 123 (101 paved, 22 turf).

In June 2025, I met with the Passport Program Director to have him certify my passport for all the requirements, including verifying each airport stamp (or alternate means of proof of a visit, such as photos/videos), as well as signatures/stamps and details about visits to three Wisconsin aviation attractions and three safety seminars.

For those with less versatile aircraft, the Bronze Level (42 airports) will earn you a FlyWI T-shirt. Add another 42 airports (Silver Level) for a new flight bag. Once my submission was validated, I was mailed a sharp leather flight jacket and a Fly Wisconsin patch to put on it.

Thus, I became the 47th aviator to complete Wisconsin's Airport Passport Program in its entirety (Gold Level). State residency is not required to participate.

(If you've completed the airport passport program in your state, we'd love to hear about it. Please email editor@piperflyer.com. —Ed.)

Matthew McDaniel *is a Master & Gold Seal CFII, ATP, MEI, AGI, IGI, and Platinum CSIP. In 36 years of flying, he has logged nearly 23,000 hours total and 6,000 hours of instruction given. As owner of Progressive Aviation Services LLC (progaviation.com), he has specialized in Technically Advanced Aircraft and Glass Cockpit instruction since 2001, yet retains a passion for teaching in and learning about antique taildraggers. He's also a Boeing 737-series captain for an international airline, holds eight turbine aircraft type ratings, and has flown nearly 160 aircraft types. Matt is one of only a handful of instructors worldwide to have earned the Master CFI designation for 12 consecutive two-year terms. He owns an 1958 Piper Pacer which he enjoys flying with his wife, two children, and friends. Send questions or comments to editor@piperflyer.org.*