Is it a bird? Is it a plane? (It's a Novelty Model Aircraft)

Contributed by Janice Angus

THE GREAT thing about having a hobby and being a member of a club is that it brings you into contact with people with similar interests and passions for whatever sport or hobby you are into. It also gives you the opportunity to see and experience the quirky or 'non conventional' elements of the activity.

Some aero modellers like to challenge the norm by designing and building all sorts of strange and innovative models. Some are so 'out there' that they appear to defy gravity and aerodynamics. Surprisingly though, they often fly quite well. In fact, some of these workshop designs have proved so successful and popular that they have developed their own sub flying groups within model clubs.

The concept of non conventional models is to have a wing of some description and then anything else you can come up with as long as it can fly. Type of materials used, method of control and power source are all open to interpretation. The challenge is putting it all together and then managing sustained and controlled flight.

Radio Controlled Birds

It only seems logical that aero modellers would try to emulate nature and create radio controlled models that resemble birds. There are two types of bird models; those that glide and those that have flapping wings (ornithopters).

As a real bird does not have a rudder or vertical stabilisers, there is a challenge in building a glide type radio controlled bird model that looks authentic and flies well. There are some Almost Ready to Fly (ARFs) bird kits that resemble stylised eagles that have a vee shaped vertical tail design. These electric powered models are quite easy to build and fly. Constructed of tough EPO (a type of polystyrene) they are light and strong. A prop on the beak provides the propulsion and, in the air, is hardly noticeable.

Simple Plastic Aeroplane Design (SPAD)

This type of aircraft is quite popular and has been around for about 10 years. The SPAD is a concept of radio controlled aircraft that focuses on construction using inexpensive, readily available materials.

Instead of going to the traditional hobby shops, you can pick up your SPAD building materials from your local DIY or hardware stores or even sign writing shop making them quite inexpensive to build. Some of the materials used can even come from your household trash. Canopies cut from clear plastic drink bottles, cowls fashioned from bottoms of bleach bottles and so on.

A common construction material is the plastic sheeting (corflute) that sign writers use. This is very robust, light and pliable and results in an aircraft able to withstand rough handling and heavy landings; perfect for the novice flyer.

A great thing about SPADs is that you can access a wide range of plans off the internet for free (www.spadworld.net). There are plans available for sedate trainer planes and gliders. If you are after something more challenging, there are also designs for combat and 3D flying SPAD models. The range also extends to quite authentic looking war birds.

If you want a robust, inexpensive, unique model then let your imagination run wild and try building your own SPAD. It's guaranteed to give you hours of flying fun.

Above and below: Nine time Fun Fly champion Jerry Smith performing a skit with Scott Allison's lawn mower for a charity fund raising event.

Soaring Eagle owned by Ming Lim.

The Flying Lawn Mower

This novel radio controlled model has been a favourite at model air shows in recent years. On the ground, they zip along like conventional lawn mowers (without cutting the grass, unfortunately). Gradually it increases in speed and then gets airborne providing an unexpected and funny spectacle for the crowd.

Originally a homebuilt model, the flying lawn mower has proved so popular that production ARF kits are now available. It is a very versatile model aircraft, being both very stable and yet able to perform aerobatic manoeuvres such as loops and tail slides.

On the ground, this model does not resemble an aircraft. The ingenuity of the design is that the body of the lawnmower is basically an aerofoil which provides lift and stability. It is almost impossible to stall and with practice, can pretty much land vertically when the engine is cut - a truly imaginative model aircraft.

Design your own

These three examples I have described barely scratch the surface of what is out there in the novel model aircraft world. Another type I have come across is the flying witch or 'Vroomhilda' which has a cape shaped wing - a great concept for Halloween. How about building your own radio controlled version of the Starship Enterprise? No problem, the plans are readily available.

Literally, the sky is the limit when it comes to what is possible with designing and building models. With a little inspiration you can design your own unique flying model or build a kit type that is already available. Push the envelope and go beyond your comfort zone. You'll likely be glad you did.