

Joe Birkemeyer

Floatplanes and Fishing Wing This Adventurer to the Icy Arctic

“Oh, it was *ridiculous*,” says pilot Joe Birkemeyer. “The fishing was so good that you’re getting, like, 40 fish a day. By the second day you’re just so tired of catching them!” He laughs: “After awhile you see them swimming by and you decide you just aren’t going to get up off the chair to do something about it.”

Surely, he dreams. Certainly, he jests.

No joke. “Twenty-four pounds was the biggest we caught,” he continues with his fish story. “And they put up a heck of a fight. I think they don’t see much in the way of lures up there.”

“Up there” where? Well, that’s the thing. While it is not Birkemeyer’s dream, or even his joke, it is his secret. It’s the secret also sworn to by the nine other guys – no women, this trip – who like himself flew Cessna amphib-fitted planes (mainly 182’s with Aerocet floats along with Birkemeyer’s 175 with Baumann’s attached) through the Arctic archipelago of Canada, where the midnight sun never sets, to camp and commune with the Arctic char. “I am so lucky that a friend of mine treated me to his secret fishing spot he has been going to for over a decade,” says Birkemeyer.

“Mum’s the word,” says Birkemeyer of the destination that could be accessed, he says, within only a three-week window of time when the Arctic ice would clear the large, teeming revelation of water that would be “the spot”: their Valhalla. “Let’s just say we fished river X.”

One can’t really begrudge the guy for wanting a little getaway guaranteed to leave the crowds behind. As general manager of Baumann Floats, LLC of New Richmond, Wisconsin, Birkemeyer’s business is amphibious airplane floats. And as everyone who ever thrilled to transform

their Cessna or Husky or Piper into a boat-that-flies knows, all is awfully, well, *busy* when it comes to the business of fun. Hard at work still after recently certifying Baumann’s 1500 floats for Taylorcraft, the Piper J-3 Cub and the Piper P-11, Birkemeyer is a GM definitely occupied. “We’ve got a few projects in our skunkworks, so to speak, but we won’t let



that out of the bag until we get ‘er done,” he says. More that is mum, it may be, but the flyer who essentially was born on floats is plenty open about how he came to be all about Baumann at work, and at play? All about exciting flying adventures the likes of his Arctic fishing trip.

“At six months old I was in the back sling of a Taylorcraft,” he says. Son of an Air Force flight doctor who had a serious floatplane passion, Birkemeyer grew up in Minnesota knowing very early the joys of father-son fishing trips to Canada in any one of the many craft the family owned

over the years. With a business and economics degree from St. Olaf College in Northfield, Wisconsin, and training in aircraft mechanics at Winona State University, it was in 1995 when Birkemeyer went looking for work. By now Birkemeyer, senior had befriended the amiable, no-nonsense owner of a local float business – the name, Bud Baumann – and suggested Birkemeyer, junior give him a call. “I remember the discussion between my dad and Bud,” says the then-job applicant who got himself hired to rivet – at \$7 an hour. “Bud said, ‘I don’t care if he is your son or not. If he’s no good I’m getting rid of him.’” The kid was good.

“I was eager to learn, and with my pilot’s license and seaplane rating, I could demonstrate the product, which Bud needed somebody to do.” He says of his friend and mentor who died in 2005: “I was more a people person than Bud. He could make anything with his hands, but he didn’t want to go to airshows...you know, that sort of thing.” The business founded by Baumann because, as he famously once said after years as a float rebuilder, “after awhile I just got tired of fixing other people’s beat-up old junk and I decided to build my own new designs,” was a natural for Birkemeyer, who made it his home. Married and the father of two, he relishes all aspects of his life-in-floats, particularly the time he spends “showing off” the product. Of course, at the many aircraft conventions and airshows he attends as Baumann’s ambassador, Birkemeyer is known for more than his excellent amphib. The competitions, he says, really rev his jets. “Take-off contests, spot landings, water bomb drops...yep. Let’s just see who I’m stacked up against.”

The floatplane aficionado has won his share of competitions in craft he tricks out



according to his quite personal preferences, like the Cessna 175 “with Baumann BF2550A amphib” he flew to that secret fishing spot whose coordinates, he’ll only divulge, are 100 miles or so south of the Northwest Passage. But it’s not just the thrill of victory that gets Birkemeyer in the air as often as possible. There is also his love affair with the seaplane, a love that’s enduring and true.

“With a land airplane, there’s not many places you can go without calling a cab and all that rigmarole,” he says. “With a floatplane you just pull up to the dock and, ‘we’re here, let’s have some fun!’”

There was hardly a dock at all on the Arctic trip, when Birkemeyer and his buddies reveled in sights far, far more wild than the Minnesota usual. Polar bears, caribou, even Beluga whales off the coast of Hudson Bay – these were only a few of the wonders that left an impression. “I landed my floatplane on the Arctic Ocean at 1:30 in the morning and it was still light,” he says, and describes how the

group made camp in their icy, isolated paradise. “The first night, after flying all day, it was 4:30 a.m. when we went to bed. Jeez. 4:30 a.m.! Weird.” The Arctic’s lingering light was only the start of all the surprises yet to come in an adventure Birkemeyer will freely, *gladly* say was “amazing.” Flying the far north on a trip that required his barging-up the necessary fuel a year in advance (he still won’t hint as to where) was for himself and his friends a floatplane pilot’s wildest fishing fantasy – made real.

“Ridiculous!” he says. “You throw your line in and you are surprised if you don’t have one every time.”

“I have a pile of pictures,” he admits. A little something to taunt the throngs who won’t, he hopes, descend on his secret Arctic heaven when that three-week, ice-free window opens. “I’ve got to keep it close-lipped,” he laughs. “If a lot of people know about it, that’s when they’ll be there. When I want to be there.”

Wouldn’t we all. ✕

Hip-deep in everything fun: Birkemeyer with his Arctic taxi