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Seaplane causes local stir with Sunday arrival

Tuesday, July 8, 2014
By Russ Mitchell -- Managing Editor



PHOTO BY DIANE PINKERTON/ A 1953 Grumman Albatross seaplane caused some excitement among boaters on the Iowa Great Lakes Sunday afternoon. The plane is capable of landing on snow, water and land.

Some boaters may have been startled, but the Iowa Department of Natural Resources knew a plane would be landing Sunday on the waters of Iowa Great Lakes.

"West Lake Okoboji is a designated seaplane landing lake," DNR conservation officer Steve Reighard confirmed. "They did contact my partner Jeff (Morrison) ahead of time and talked about landing."

About every other year, the DNR can expect a floatplane capable of seating 4-8 passengers to touch down on West Lake. Morrison had never seen a big seaplane land in Okoboji -- until Sunday.



PHOTO BY TEHRA DROST / Tony Phillippi owns a company that restores rare planes. His Grumman Albatross made a landing Sunday on West Lake Okoboji.

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"This one is much larger," Reighard agreed. "The original plan was: The gentleman was going to fly in from Minneapolis around 6 a.m. and land. Then he was going to take off late in the evening, after the boat traffic had dispersed. Due to fog that morning, which was quite heavy, it came in late."

The DNR doesn't have jurisdiction over water landings -- the FAA regulates flight plans. Pilot Hans Meyer was doing proficiency flying to stay up-to-date on water landing certifications. The plane's owner, Tony Phillippi, said Meyer landed on six lakes during the course of the day.

Reighard said pilots traditionally circle the lake a few times to find an area with the least amount of boat traffic. A quiet spot near the end of the July 4 weekend was harder to find.



PHOTO BY JOHN CARSTENS

"I did not see the takeoff and I did not see the landing, so I am not sure how close he came to boats," Reighard said. "He was within 40 yards of some boats -- even our patrol boats."

A handful of boaters thought the plane was in distress, simply because the plane's size was out-of-the-ordinary for the area. The plane has a fairly uncommon history as well.

Phillippi calls his Grumman Albatross a "Tri-Phibian" for touchdowns on land, water and snow (using skis). It was purchased by the U.S. Air Force in 1953.



PHOTO BY KEVIN & TASHA GLISSMAN

The plane flew on search and rescue missions in Korea and Vietnam on behalf of injured and wounded soldiers, sailors and airmen.

"It's been to the North Pole and it has been to the South Pole," Phillippi said.

Both Phillippi and his pilot came to the area because of connections to the Iowa Great Lakes. They spent time with friends and family during their two-hour stay near the noon hour Sunday.

"I had done some construction work there over the years and always wanted to come in and see it on the water side -- it's a beautiful lake," Phillippi said.

The plane owner also complemented the area's vitality and boaters on Sunday.

"The water was beautiful, the water quality was good and there were a lot of people there that day," Phillippi said. "That was a busy weekend. It's quite a hub of recreation there. Everyone on that lake was really fun and pleasant. They were well-behaved. We kind of got mobbed by boats and it's always a little scary about what people are going to do -- but the folks there were very helpful and cooperative. It was nice for a change."

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