

Flight Shame in Great Barrington

When it comes to aviation, small is not beautiful.

Susan Brind Morrow, *The Nation* | February 9, 2022



Small private planes cause a nuisance in Great Barrington, but the FAA won't do anything about it. (Creative Commons / Wikimedia)

Thirty years ago I was living on the Red Sea coast on the Egypt-Sudan border in an area where there were no roads. Nomadic tribesmen went down to the sea to fish and sometimes found the shore covered with plastic that drifted in on the waves. Plastic bags filled with air and skittered away over the landscape making circles in the desert wind. I think of those plastic bags when I see the small planes coming over the wooded ridges around the old farmhouse where I live in rural New York state. Since the pandemic began, there has been a dramatic increase in the number of people going up in small planes. These are coming from an airfield in Great Barrington, Mass., where the [newspapers reports](#) town hall meetings packed with local residents shouting at the owners of the Barrington airfield about the squalid atmosphere of noise pollution and intrusion—the general degradation of conditions of life they impose on the people below.

Small planes fly low above the ground. They are the only vehicles in the United States that still use leaded gasoline. [Studies from the Harvard Medical School](#) and elsewhere link air traffic noise to the onset of heart disease and stroke. *The Berkshire Eagle* reports that the airfield has come up with a noise mitigation strategy: Tell the pilots to [fly across the border into New York state](#).

The damage done to daily life by an airfield of this kind stands in sharp contrast to the trivial nature of who the pilots are and what they are doing. A glance at [FlightAware](#) shows that in

Barrington these people, who teach or have taken up [aviation as a hobby](#), fly around in circles pouring noise and toxic emissions on the landscape and the people who live there.

The Massachusetts pilots use local New York state farms for practice, circling the fields with the farmhouse as the target in the middle. The supervisor of the Town of Austerlitz sums up the situation: “This is obviously deliberate harassment, but the pilots tell me they can do whatever they want.”

Small planes are unmonitored. They do not need to use tracking devices. They can “request invisibility.” The pilots of small planes are not supposed to fly below 500 feet, but as their transponders are easily turned off, the FAA cannot track their altitude. If an amateur pilot plays at flying “below the radar” low above the ground, who can stop them? At least Jetskis are confined to shorelines and motorcycles by roadways. They cannot circle houses revving their engines. But small planes buzz houses for fun.

Last summer careening small planes [killed a woman](#) on a riding mower and [hit a woman](#) in a kayak. In recent years an [87-year-old man crashed](#) not far from here in Ghent, a 17-year-old girl [crashed in Millbrook](#), and an amateur pilot [flew into a house](#) in Lagrangeville, setting it on fire and killing the residents inside.

It is time for the FAA to draft new regulations that prioritize the health and safety of people on the ground. The FAA needs to insist that recreational planes fly at an altitude high enough to muffle the engine noise, that they are tracked and monitored, and that they are not used in a manner that endangers public welfare, whether by dangerous proximity to people and houses, or noise pollution that poses a threat to health and well-being. Currently, the FAA seems to restrict its focus solely to the pilots and their machines. There needs to be broader attention paid to the effect that small planes have on the environment, and on the people who live in it. Small planes are not harmless. And experience has taught those who live near private airfields that we cannot rely on the manners, skill, or sense of responsibility of the pilots.

Scaling back commercial aviation has long been a primary topic in the discussion of mitigating climate change. The [Flight Shame movement](#) already considers flights under 200 miles unnecessary and environmentally indefensible. Last year, France moved to ban short-haul domestic flights.

Small planes need to be part of this discussion. They have a particularly disproportionate effect as polluters of the environment, and while they are an amusement and convenience to pilots passing through—or over—that comes the expense of people who have given their lives to the place they live in. The romance of Lindbergh’s solo flight gave way in a mere few decades to Lindbergh’s recognition that aviation would become a blight on the world. Though other aspects of his career remain problematic, he spent the last years of his life fighting for conservation. The answer to climate change does not lie in pursuing escapist fantasies in the air, but in taking responsibility for where you are, for the ground under your feet.

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