



John Skinner shows off one of his smaller remote-controlled airplanes as he stands in front of one of his larger models.

## A Touch-and-Go Hobby

**JOHN SKINNER WAS AN 18-YEAR-OLD AIRMAN** serving at Ellsworth Air Force Base in South Dakota when one of his co-workers brought a remote-controlled airplane to show off at work. Eyes alight, Skinner soon found himself in a hobby shop, where he bought his own starter RC airplane, the Carl Goldberg Eagle 63. “It was the best trainer back in the day,” Skinner says.

He was thrilled with his new hobby, but he was also intent on marrying his high school sweetheart, Penny. As a young airman jet mechanic, his paycheck couldn’t support an expensive hobby and a family, too. He gladly chose family—and laid his hobby aside for some 25 years.

In 2000, when he retired from the Air Force, and he and Penny returned to the family homestead in Mineola, Skinner reignited his passion for RC airplanes. “I started back with a

‘slimer’ or ‘nitro’ plane,” he says. “I liked it so well, I went with my very first plane. I bought another Carl Goldberg Eagle 63.”

When radio-controlled models first came out, they were powered by internal combustion engines whose exhaust fuel and oil caused a residue or “slime” to leak onto the model—thus the nickname.

“I started off by flying by myself, but then later I went to Tyler to the North Side RC Park,” he says. Skinner met fellow enthusiasts, and it wasn’t long before he joined the Texas Unlimited Fun Flyers Club, an RC club. He is now the vice president of the TUFF Club. “It’s really like a brotherhood,” he says. “You start talking. You start learning. You start flying. And you help other people.”

Once Skinner regained his flying proficiency and talents, his



hobby soared to new heights. He progressed to operating cleaner, modern gasoline, or “gasser,” aerobatic aircraft. About TUFF, he says there is really no agenda: “We go out and fly. As long as you are having fun and flying safely, that’s what matters.”

TUFF has about 200 members, with 50 or so active flyers. At TUFF there aren’t any dues and, Skinner says, “We are not based on meetings. We only have two a year. The rest of the time, the name of the game is: WE FLY!”

For beginners interested in the hobby, Skinner has some advice. “If they are serious about learning how to fly, I recommend that they get a computer simulator and learn how to keep a plane in the air.” The gas-powered RC planes can run anywhere from several hundred dollars to upward of several thousand. Crashing one can be costly. Skinner whispers, “We don’t speak of crashes!”

Simulators, such as Skinner’s favorite, Real Flight, mimic the real-life experience of flying any of 140 types of RC aircraft, including helicopters. The simulator has a USB handheld controller just like an actual radio-controlled plane. Or, using an adapter, a pilot can plug in the actual radio controller he will use to fly his plane. Practice is as close to real life as you can get. But if you crash your virtual RC plane or helicopter, there are no worries. You just hit reset and go again.

The next step Skinner recommends for new flyers who have progressed is to get what’s called a “foamy.” Foamies are relatively inexpensive trainer RC airplanes that can range from \$50 to \$200. They require minimal assembly but, most important, they are forgiving of mistakes. Because they are lightweight, they don’t fly—or crash—at top speeds. When they fall from the sky, they don’t hit the ground like a brick. Therefore, if there’s a mishap, the plane likely can be repaired.

About RC flying, Skinner says, “I am no expert. I go out to have fun.” But he is a pretty serious hobbyist, as evidenced by his stable of planes. He has three large gas-powered RC airplanes that range in size from a 110-inch wingspan to 91 inches. His new favorite was an unexpected gift from Penny that he named “Little Surprise.” It’s an Extra 300 model (104-inch wingspan). He also has a YAK 54 Version 2 called Lone Star (110-inch wingspan), as well as another YAK (91-inch wing-span). Skinner says most of his planes are Extreme Flight brand. “I like how they fly,” he says. “I like their customer service, and they are very well built.”

Skinner also still has his trainer and several foamies, as well as the highly advised computer simulator. Not surprisingly, he also has a drone. But, he says he really just uses that to catch photographs at RC-enthusiast gatherings and fly-ins. Because of the large size of the models, along with the ancillary maintenance equipment, Skinner has a sizable custom trailer that he loads up to travel to events all around Texas. Once a year, he and Penny also travel to the Extreme Flight Championships. It’s historically been held in Muncie, Indiana, but this past year, it was in Champaign, Illinois.

XFC is a gathering of some of the world’s best RC pilots, who fly daring choreographed and freestyle routines in daytime and nighttime demonstrations. They have what is called



**FROM TOP:** Three of John Skinner’s large remote-controlled planes stand wing to wing, spanning more than 25 feet. Skinner’s computer simulator helps him master extreme maneuvers before he tries them out with one of his expensive planes. He thoroughly enjoys his model airplane hobby and the camaraderie that abounds among enthusiasts.



**Rob Pfaff operates his plane from the flight line at Tyler Northside RC Park.**

3D-style flying, where the pilots wow the crowds with hovers, rolls, spins, vertical descents, stalling and inverted flying.

Although he is retired from the military, Skinner works full-time at Ozarka Water as a mechanic for blow molders, the machines that form the bottles. With the Tyler flying field an hour away from his home, Skinner wanted to find a flying field closer to home. As it happened, another TUFF club member and Mineola resident, Rob Pfaff, who also works hard at his own construction business, was also hoping to cut down on travel time to enjoy his hobby closer to home. Club members introduced Skinner to Pfaff.

Skinner suggested a city-owned landfill site as a possible place. “I talked to the city and asked for permission, and they gave it to me,” Pfaff said. “Because it’s actually landfill property, they can’t use it for much of anything. We made a 40-by-600-foot runway. We keep our area mowed and maintained. It’s all done by volunteers.”

Wood County EC Serviceman Keith Warren and son Christopher attest to the friendliness and helpfulness of the TUFF members. Christopher had visited the Tyler field to observe, and members there told him about the Mineola field.

PHOTOS COURTESY OF JOHN SKINNER





When he got his own plane, he and his dad went to the Mineola field to it try out. Keith explains, “My son, Christopher, had a brand-new plane that he was going to fly for the first time. Even though John Skinner has very expensive planes, he was just as encouraging and excited to watch Christopher fly his \$50 foamy plane. It made for a very good experience.”

Pfaff echoes the enthusiasm that Skinner feels for RC flying. “I’ve always been interested in aviation. Then one year for Christmas, my wife gave me an RC helicopter,” Pfaff says. “After visiting the Tyler field, I just became intrigued with it. The camaraderie is great. Our motto is: ‘Go fly and have fun.’ We like it laid-back. We love to invite people to come have fun with us, and we like to help people.”

About his fellow fliers and TUFF members, he says, “Some of the people I have met have become some of the best friendships I’ve ever had in my life.”

Skinner sums it up by saying, “It’s a lot of fun. It’s just one heck of a hobby!”

When TUFF members are not flying in Mineola or Tyler, they often are traveling together across the state, supporting other clubs that host fly-ins at Texas locales such as Malakoff,

Jacksonville, Marshall, Round Rock and Austin.

Skinner and others, in addition to just getting together, use the Mineola field to host an annual RC demonstration fundraiser. It’s called the Flight of Dreams, and the event is held on the second Saturday in December. The price of admission is a new, unwrapped toy or a monetary donation. Everything collected goes to the Mineola Marine Corps Toys for Tots and the Wood County Child Protective Services Rainbow Room. Skinner says he always wanted a chance to support his hometown.

“We give the kids a chance to have a nice Christmas,” he says. “We do the flying, and the kids do the dreaming.”

The TUFF Club, a member of the National Academy of Model Aeronautics, flies out of Northside Park in Tyler, (on the northeast side of the intersection of Highway 69 North and Loop 323). The Mineola RC field is at the end of Bromberg Street, near Tractor Supply and Dow Autoplex.

Those interested in joining the TUFF Club, or just seeing some RC flying, are welcome to contact Skinner via email at [wrangl23@yahoo.com](mailto:wrangl23@yahoo.com). The club’s website is [tuffclub.net](http://tuffclub.net), and the club can be found on Facebook at [facebook.com/texasunlimitedfunflyers](https://facebook.com/texasunlimitedfunflyers).

# 3 Ways To Prevent Electrical Fires

**THREE OF THE MOST COMMON CAUSES** of electrical fires in the home are 100 percent preventable.

More than 1,300 people die or are injured in the 26,000 house fires caused by electricity mishaps every year, the U.S. Fire Administration estimates. Here's how to rid your home of the most common culprits:

**1. Extension cords.** These handy wire-stretchers are not designed for continuous use. They're made to solve temporary problems: When a Christmas tree is too far from an outlet, for instance, an extension cord could be used for a couple of weeks for a few hours a day.

Too many homeowners use extension cords year-round, and that can cause them to overheat. An overheated cord is a fire hazard.

If you don't have enough outlets, or if your heart is set on putting a lamp out of reach, have an electrician install additional outlets, including one closer to the lamp's ideal location.

**2. Old wiring and outlets.** If your home is more than 20 years old and its electrical wires and outlets have never been updated, a hazard could lurk behind its walls.

Electrical standards have changed over the years as the experts have become more knowledgeable about electrical safety. Also, the electrical load in your home has grown as computers, phone chargers and mega-sized TVs have moved in.

The electrical systems in older homes were designed to handle less activity. Overloading that system can trigger a fire. Likewise, electrical components don't last forever. If yours are deteriorating, it's time to replace them.

Finally, older homes have few grounded outlets. All outlets in every room that has water or that gets wet—bathrooms, kitchens, basements, garages and laundry rooms, for instance—need ground-fault circuit interrupters. Adding them is a job for a professional electrician.

**3. Overloaded outlets.** Even if your home is new, you can overload its outlets.

Plugging too many appliances, lamps and electronics into a single outlet can overheat the wires and the outlets. That can lead to a fire.

If your circuits are tripping often, that's a sure sign that something's wrong. Call in a pro to fix the problem.



Plugging too many appliances into one power strip or outlet can cause a fire in your home or office.

## THE VALUE OF ELECTRICITY

It might seem that everything costs more these days, but electricity is still a great bargain.

Just look what a dollar's worth can get you:

**36**   
(intense) hours of gaming

**48**   
hours of watching TV

**72**   
freshly ironed shirts

**72**   
hours of laptop Internet access

**100**   
hot pots of coffee

**375**   
pieces of toast (nicely browned)

Sources: U.S. Department of Energy; National Rural Electric Cooperative Association

# The Cleanest, Greenest Energy Is the Energy Not Used

**MANY PEOPLE ARE LOOKING FOR WAYS TO CUT ENERGY COSTS**—including renewable energy options. But before you invest in a renewable system, first make sure your home or business is as efficient as possible. The cheapest, cleanest and greenest energy is the energy not used, and this comes from energy efficiency.

Let nature do some of the work. Consider leaving your windows open and turning off the air conditioner at night, when temperatures are much more moderate. Then keep the windows shut during daylight hours to help keep that cooler air inside. You can also install window coverings, which can block out sunlight and heat during the day. Also, increase insulation and seal cracks that let out cooled air.

Make sure that your cooling equipment is in top-notch condition. If possible, move the air conditioner out of direct sunlight. Regularly clean or replace dirty air-conditioner filters. A new, more energy-efficient air conditioner can also cut energy use.

A programmable thermostat can cut back on costs while you are away from home. Program the thermostat to a warmer temperature while away and to a cooler temperature when you expect to return home. Setting the thermostat as high as you can while still remaining comfortable can help reduce costs and lead to a smaller cooling bill. Also, fans can make higher temperatures in the home feel more comfortable.

On the warmest days, avoid using the oven. Grill outside or use the stove or a microwave.

Cut back on water-heating costs by taking shorter showers and using low-flow showerheads. Run clothes washers and dishwashers only when they have full loads. Additionally, lower the set temperature on the water heater. Energy.gov suggests setting the water heater temperature to no higher than 120 degrees.

Take into account the best times to run your appliances. Avoid using them during typical peak electricity demand hours, around 4–7 p.m. Also be sure to switch off and unplug appliances when they are not being used. Consider air-drying clothes and dishes. Turn off lights that are not in use, and switch to light-emitting diode bulbs.

If you are still interested in incorporating renewable energy after implementing these conservation tips, the Energy Education Council has developed a checklist, available at [energyeducation.org/checklist.pdf](http://energyeducation.org/checklist.pdf), to help you assess your energy use, goals, property and more.



Save energy by only washing full loads, and avoid using washers during hours of peak demand.



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**Tuesday**, Family Dollar, *Mount Vernon*  
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