I David Ashby

Decathlon

AEROBATIC IT MAY BE, BUT AN EXTRA 300 IT CERTAINLY ISN'T! DAVID ASHBY INVESTIGATES THE AEROBATIC POTENTIAL OF SEAGULL'S TAKE ON THE CLASSIC HIGH WINGER

The Decathlon variant of the Bellanca Citabria (airbatic backwards in case you hadn't noticed) has been in production since 1970. The aircraft is still a steady seller and $141,900 will buy you the basic model. That may sound a lot but I'm reliably informed that £70,000 isn't a bad price for a tandem seat aerobatic trainer / intermediate aerobatic mount... if you can afford it.

The design has a certain character that endears it to the R/C model industry, indeed a number of kits have appeared in one form or another over the years, most recently Seagull's EP Decathlon that we reviewed in our June 2007 issue. This i.c. version from the same manufacturer has been around since 2003 and is listed at £89.99, which represents a lot of model for the money. At $^1/_5$ scale it boasts wingspan of 68", a huge wing area and a fair share of flightline presence.

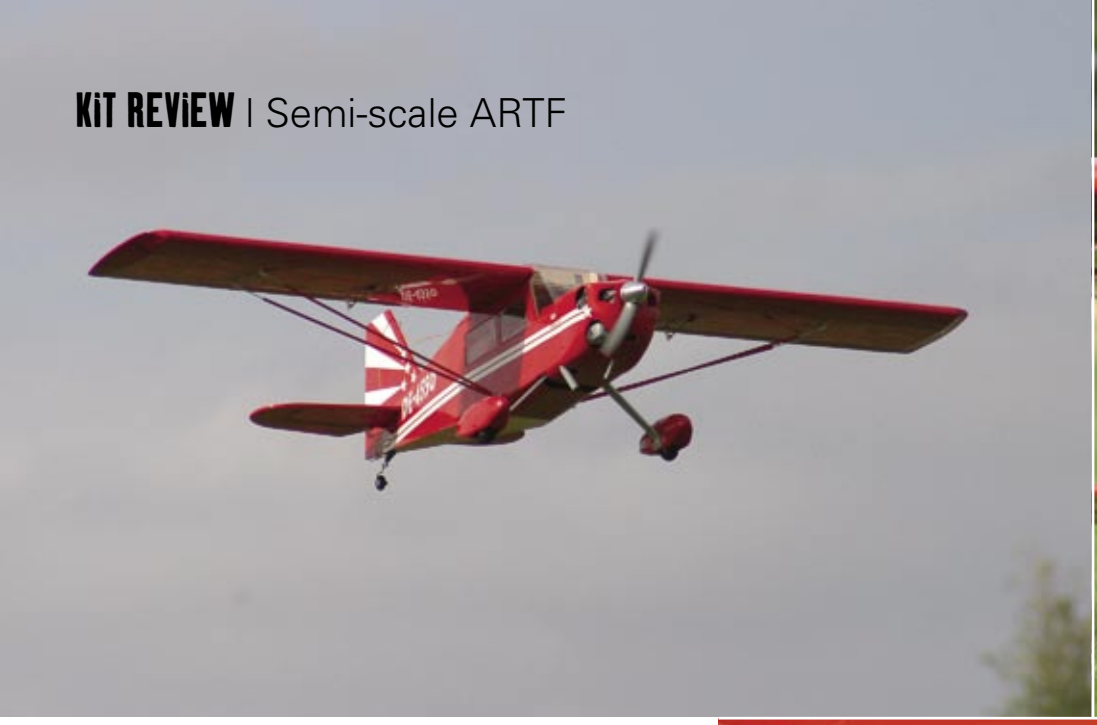
SCREW FIX

The kit represents an entirely typical ARTF model, albeit one that has undergone some tweaks and improvements since it first appeared. The level of pre-build is high and the finish, as we now come to expect from Seagull, is very good. Hardware quality is fine, so using the tank, wheels, horns and clevises included in the kit isn't a hardship in any respect. Likewise, the spats are strong so normal grass field use shouldn't truncate their life span, although larger wheels could be fitted if your landing site is particularly rough.

Having flown the 51" EP Decathlon all summer, I was curious to see how this larger version would perform. In terms of construction it's a similar beast employing a laser cut ply frame with the odd dash of balsa

I just love the Decathlon profile, it makes a refreshing change from all the Edges and Extras we so often see.

Someone has done it all for you! Let's just say this is one highly prefabricated model.



Gently does it. The model's perfectly stable as long as you don't try and hover it!

here and there. The wings are a built-up ply / balsa mix, whilst the tail feathers are similarly constructed. In keeping with all Seagull kits the level of pre-build is high. To this end you'll find that the motor mount has been fitted to the painted firewall, the control rods that drive the tail feathers are pre-installed, as are the captive nuts for the undercarriage bolts, and there's even a recess in the fuselage to house a two-stroke torpedo silencer. As you can probably guess, then, a speedy build is guaranteed.

The spats are very strong; only serious abuse will shorten their life span.

FIT AND FINISH

I chose my trusty O.S. 46AX for my Decathlon as it fitted between the motor mount bearers perfectly. I thought it would be expecting too much for the silencer to fit perfectly in the fuselage recess but it did, this making the engine installation one of the quickest I've ever experienced. Since the elevator employs two servos, one for each half, a Y-lead is required to link them together for all but the most confident computer transmitter users. The remaining servos simply drop into place in their respective pre-cut ply trays. As you might expect, there's plenty of room for a receiver and battery, the fuel tank just slides into place and, well, you get the drift, it's all so effortless - I really can't think of anything to add as far as putting the Decathlon together is concerned. A week of evenings should see things through to completion.

Whilst they often present a bone of contention, the wing struts on this one have been engineered well enough and in use just one bolt on either side is requited to hold them in place. Fortunately, they also swing flat for transportation.

Since there's bags of room under the cowl, only modest cutting is required - even less if you use a four-stroke.

MILD AEROBATICS

My model balanced just where it should, this with my four-cell NiCad as far forward as possible, directly behind the fuel tank. Although the suggested control surface movements were dialled in for the test flight, my first take-off wasn't too pretty, indeed the powerful rudder meant I kept over correcting the swing, this resulting in drunken tracking and a stodgy lift-off. That was my fault, of course, so I've subsequently reduced the rudder movement by 10% and now just breath on the rudder to keep her tracking straight.

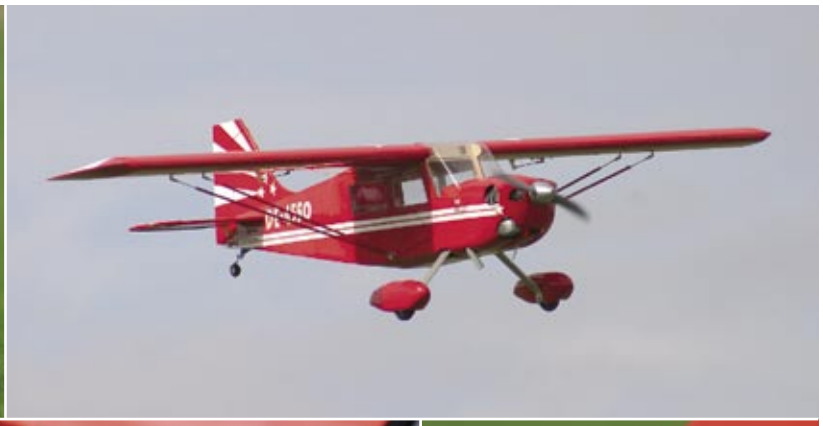
The climb-out is positive, not outstanding, but perfectly acceptable. Trim wise I seemed to need around 5 - 6 clicks of right rudder but otherwise the aileron, and elevator were just about fine, although I have employed some 35% exponential on these surfaces since the first flight, just to suit my flying preference.

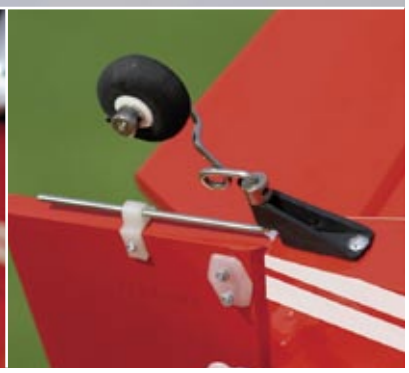
Once airborne it became immediately obvious that the

Decathlon wasn't what I'd expected. With a good few flights in the bag I've now come to terms with its characteristics and am able to enjoy flying it. So, before I tell you what this model is, let me tell you what it isn't. It isn't a sport aerobatic aircraft in the WOT4 sense, it's too heavy and simply too big to fly in this manner with the recommended powerplant. A .46 two-stroke gives this aeroplane a very scale performance. Think red clipped wing Cub and you'll be putting it in the right pigeonhole. A scale aeroplane needs to be flown in a scale manner and the Decathlon

If you wish to fit a pilot or some interior detail, the windscreen can be removed for greater access to the cockpit.

An exhaust deflector helps direct the gunge through 90° and away from the airframe.

There seems little to say about the kit itself, indeed everything is fit for purpose. I added my own metal spinner, which I believe improves the scale appearance.

gives the pilot one option. Fly it in a scale manner, anticipating its needs, whilst using its momentum to feed the next manoeuvre, and you have the key to unlock the model and savour a subtler, yet no less demanding and ultimately rewarding flying experience.

Red Cub? Well the Piper Cub is a classic, no doubt about that, yet it's a model that seems to trip-up more flyers than just about any other. The high wing configuration screams 'trainer' to the onlooker yet as any Cub pilot will tell you, it's anything but a trainer!

In the air then the Decathlon has an optimum speed of around $^1/_2$ throttle where it cruises comfortably. Fly it faster than this and it becomes ungainly. The throttle isn't redundant, it's required to pull the model through manoeuvres - up and over the top of a loop for instance. The stall isn't alarming, she'll slow down to a walking pace before the port wing starts to drop, but drop it eventually will. This trait shouldn't affect the landing phase, the Decathlon settles in nicely on finals and as long as the throttle is used to bring her in then you'll find her a perfectly manageable bird that'll treat you to smooth landings every time.

Back in the air and despite the above, she'll pull a decent loop although she needs to be flown through the inverted phase, pulling on elevator to stop her wallowing at the top. Rolls are comfortable when down elevator is used to keep her level during the inverted phase. Stall turns are easy - the big rudder kicks the model over smartly enough and there's no sign of fishtailing on the down line. Ultimately manoeuvres need to be flown large and slow, just like the real thing!

SUITS YOU?

A bit of a cliché I know but the big airframe would lend itself to some scale detailing, the front cockpit window should come away with a little encouragement revealing a huge interior just ripe for an instrument panel, false floor, tandem seats and, of course, a pilot or two.

Don't be duped by the high wing configuration, the model's not a trainer. As the instructions state, it's a model for intermediate and advanced pilots who want a satisfying scale-ish model that will provide a challenge once airborne.

Finally, with hindsight, a .60 four-stroke would be my power source of choice. I prefer to fly a model with some horses to spare and there's room in the cowl for a bigger engine.

DATAFILE

Name:	Decathlon
Aircraft type:	Semi-scale ARTF
Manufactured by:	Seagull Models
UK distributor:	J. Perkins Distribution Ltd. Tel. 01622 854300 www.jperkinsdistribution.co.uk
RRP:	£89.99
Wingspan:	67.75" (1720mm)
Fuselage length:	50" (1270mm)
Wing area:	762 sq. in.
All-up weight:	7 - 8 lbs
Wing loading:	21 - 24oz / sq. ft.
Control functions:	Aileron, elevator, rudder, throttle
Rec'd motor:	.40 - .46 two-stroke, .50 - .72 four-stroke