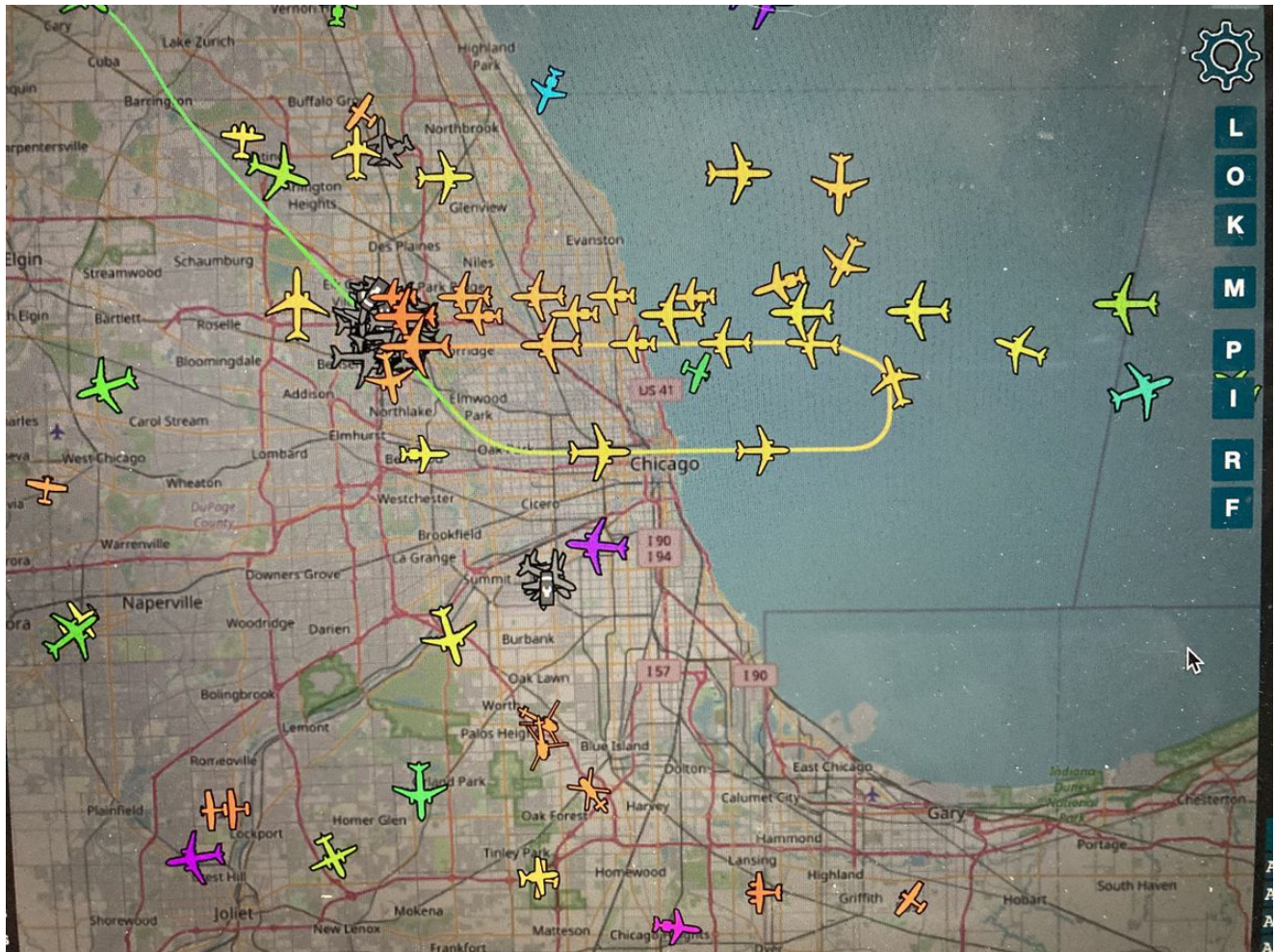


Landmarks: Transportation fan or not, flight tracking sites show the sky is full of stories

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Paul Eisenberg December 05, 2021



A photo taken Thursday afternoon of flight tracking website adsbexchange.com shows planes lining up to land at O'Hare International Airport and other air traffic over the Chicago area.

It used to be that nobody wanted to live by waterways. Often polluted and sometimes conveying industrial freight, developers usually gave the area's rivers and streams a cold shoulder, facing buildings away from ugly barges and unsavory smells.

But over the last few decades as efforts were made to clean up urban waterways, they turned from necessary nuisances into desirable attractions. Instead of blemished industrial land, they became sought-after waterfront properties in many areas. Riverwalk attractions were

developed in places like Naperville, Aurora and downtown Chicago.

Even hardworking blue collar waterways like the Cal Sag Channel are now seen as assets for commercial and residential development. And the river traffic that ply those waters have started to draw positive attention. Social media fan pages that have sprouted up focusing on inland water freight have thousands of followers who share videos of boats, ships and the bellowing sound of “captain’s salutes.”

Though the Chicago area was born on the back of river traffic — the Illinois and Michigan Canal linking the Great Lakes to the Mississippi River was a key factor in the city’s rise to prominence — it’s no longer the primary conveyance around here.

Still, we live at a worldwide nexus of transportation, so it’s no wonder that some of us have become fans of transit modes. That’s reflected even in the suburbs.

A small park in Homewood was established just to accommodate railroad fans and events such as Driving the Dixie celebrate our motorcar heritage. Like water freight, those transportation modes each have legions of devoted enthusiasts.

Another transportation mode is much easier to spot from just about everywhere, and maybe that’s why it’s becoming more popular. Plane spotting is as easy as looking up. It’s like bird-watching, but simpler as most air traffic doesn’t try to hide from people.

An American Airlines jet approaches O'Hare International Airport Tuesday, June 29, 2021, in Chicago. (John J. Kim / Chicago Tribune)

My friend Sean Pender has long been a transportation fan, particularly of air traffic. When our group of friends was younger and we thought we were cool, we’d poke gentle fun at him for his unabashed enthusiasm about trains and planes, because that stuff wasn’t cool.

He didn’t care, and has remained a fan for years. In the 1990s, he used to bring his young son to a more approachable Midway Airport to watch planes take off from near the end of the runway, and as technology advanced, he went along with it. Now he’s an airplane tracking aficionado, using a website and app to find out what exactly is flying overhead, where it came from and where it’s going.

“It’s gotten better over the years,” he said. “It’s mostly curiosity. You look up and you’re like, ‘I want to find out where this plane is going.’ And once you find out these aircraft going over your house are coming from Europe, it’s amazing.”

“It’s always cool to see the different paint schemes,” Pender said. “The airlines are now painting all their planes different. United (Airlines) has a Star Wars airplane, and ANA from Japan has one that looks like a droid from Star Wars.”

“Yesterday I was in Calumet City and saw an Air Force transport plane,” Pender said. “It’s amazing to me. I’ll be sitting in my front room and see on the radar a plane coming up from Atlanta going to Minneapolis, and the radar shows it’s over Michigan City (Indiana), but I can see it clearly. Another time I was in Schaumburg and saw a huge one. It was a Lufthansa going from Houston back to Paris. I looked on the map and it was over Ottawa (Illinois), but I could totally see it.”



Dan Streufert, a Mount Prospect native who graduated from the Illinois Mathematics and Science Academy in Aurora, runs the flight tracking website ADS-B Exchange. Streufert, who has a pilots license and flies small planes for fun, said he became interested in airplanes while growing up near O'Hare Airport.

Dan Streufert, a Mount Prospect native who graduated from the Illinois Mathematics and Science Academy in Aurora, developed the flight tracking website ADS-B Exchange a few years ago as the Federal Aviation Administration was shifting from radar-based operations to a self-reporting system for aircraft called automatic dependent surveillance — broadcast.

It’s a system that allows for “real-time precision and shared situational awareness” for pilots and air traffic controllers alike, and relies on aircraft broadcasting their exact position through a transponder.

It also allows anyone with the right receiver to see that information, and Streufert wrote software that lets a network of observers compile the information on a real-time map. It shows the position of everything in the air from ultralight aircraft to international flights to Air Force One.

“I put the word out and people started sending their data in, and now we have over 7,000 different receivers all over the world sending their data in,” he said.

That data is shared at <https://globe.adsbexchange.com>, which Streufert said attracts 50,000 to 60,000 users every day to check out what’s going on overhead.

He said while flight tracking as a hobby is gaining interest in the United States, “it’s much more popular in the United Kingdom and the Netherlands.”

And it’s attracted the attention of powerful people, as well. Streufert said he’s gotten certified mail from attorneys in Moscow, where “really rich Russian guys don’t want people to see where their jets are going.”

Helicopters circle over the Tri-State Tollway Thursday afternoon as depicted on the flight tracking website [adsbexchange.com](https://globe.adsbexchange.com). (Paul Eisenberg / Daily Southtown)

“The other day I saw three planes trailing each other over Colorado,” he said. “They’re flying at 40,000 feet and squawking these blocked codes, and I thought ‘what is this?’”

He mentioned the mysterious planes on Twitter, and soon “a bunch of people got involved, eventually even finding the aircraft after they landed at a private airfield that happened to have a public webcam functioning.

“It turned out it was a group of executives from a Fortune 20 health insurance firm taking an executive outing to Pebble Beach and Monterrey,” Streufert said. “I think they wanted to stay under the radar, but they weren’t under the radar on that one. ... But if they hadn’t used this blocking service, it’s likely nobody would have really noticed.”

He has commercial users for the data as well, such as airport supply companies gauging air traffic congestion and timing, that help pay overhead such as the huge server load the site requires.

For me, though, it’s fun to find out what’s overhead, whether it’s a jumbo jet carrying people internationally, a smaller corporate jet registered to a megachurch or corporation or the Chicago police helicopter patrolling the Dan Ryan expressway or circling somewhere in pursuit of a suspect.