‘DRONE DIVA DESI’ OPERATES A FLEET OF 12 REMOTE-CONTROLLED AIRCRAFT

News / Personalities

“They are my babies,” says Desiree Ekstein of her high-flying brood. “They all have names.”

Ekstein, a Lake Elsinore resident, is known to her friends as Drone Diva Desi.

She owns a dozen of the unmanned flying marvels, flocks of which touched down in holiday stockings across the nation last month.

But Ekstein, 52, said she didn’t get a new drone for Christmas. She did receive accessories for her already diverse, and growing, collection.

Ekstein plans to buy still more “babies” as more advanced models hit the marketplace. She talks about them the way someone would talk about a child or a beloved pet.

Ekstein pointed to a DJI Phantom 3 Pro. It has gold markings on it. She customized it by adding four gold capital letters: D-I-V-A.

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“This one right here is called Goldy,” she said.

Others go by “Fanny,” “Tom” and “Ty.”

Goldy is her favorite because it is versatile and can produce high-resolution video, something the former party-rental store owner is harnessing to try to carve a niche in the Inland aerial photography industry. She said she recently produced a video for Hawk Ranch in Murrieta, a hot spot for weddings, and just cut a deal to do one for a recreational vehicle park.

Ekstein said she has volunteered to send up drones to aid search-and-rescue efforts as well.

“It’s not as feasible to put up helicopters in some of these areas,” she said.

A few months ago, she joined the ranks of commercial operators who have obtained permission to make money with drones – the Federal Aviation Administration has issued more than 3,000 permits on a case-by-case basis. Those who fly strictly for the fun of it don’t need a specialized permit as long as they register their drone and adhere to a set of federal rules, such as staying below 400 feet.

Ekstein’s fondness for drones – an obsession really, she admits – is something that dates to four years ago. That’s when Ekstein bought her first one: an AR Parrot.

“She crashed it,” said her mother, Rita Wilsey.

SECOND PARROT

And, so, Ekstein bought a second Parrot. “I had to get another one while I was repairing that,” she explained.

The Parrots have had their moments. Ekstein crashed one into a tree, she recalled.

“I think I landed one on my mom’s roof one time,” she added. By that, she meant a hard landing.

But both are airworthy today.

From that pair, her collection ballooned.

And practice makes perfect. Over time, Ekstein got the hang of operating a drone.

Today, she skillfully flies around the house – in the house – miniature drones that fit in one’s hand. For example, her Cheerson CX-10 Nano Drone is 2 inches wide.

“It’s nice to have little ones that you can toy around with,” she said. “They’re not as expensive if you break them.”

Outdoors, Ekstein carefully navigates the flight of the much larger Phantom 3 and a Yuneec Q500 Typhoon, which has long legs that function like landing gear.

She often turns heads by rolling out to male-dominated flying sites in southwest Riverside County, quickly demonstrating she is not there to watch but rather to deftly send her own sophisticated machine soaring.

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She wears a T-shirt that reads: “I know I fly like a girl … Try to keep up!”

Yes, there is just no doubt the Drone Diva from Lake Elsinore is head over heels about drones.

“It’s amazing. I love the technology,” Ekstein said. “And this is the future.”

‘I WONDER WHAT’S NEXT’

Of course, the technology is far from perfect. There are problems. Rogue operators have flown drones near airliners. Others have interfered with firefighting aircraft, endangering pilots who were trying to tame wildfires in California’s national forests.

“Who would even think of doing that?” she asked. “I hope that people learn to fly them right because they can be dangerous.”

But she predicted the wrinkles will be ironed out.

“It’ll be rocky. There is always controversy on things,” she said. “But it is the future.”

As for why she personally has acquired so many drones, Ekstein said that’s because she is enthralled by advances in technology and feels the need to keep up as gadgets evolve. Take the personal computer. She was quick to run out and get a new model.

“I was always the first to get the newest and greatest (cell)phone,” she added.

And now Ekstein is doing the same with drones.

“I wonder what’s next,” she said.

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