

Radio-controlled model cars now the rage and roar

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By Rob Ferguson
staff reporter

It's the biggest grasshopper you'll ever see in these parts — just a little smaller than a loaf of bread.

Grasshopper is a radio-controlled model car about 10 times smaller than a real car. It's billed as a "high-performance, off-road racer."

The man behind the radio controls is Bryan McLeod, of RR 1 Embro, one of a number of area residents who spend their leisure time making the cars from kits and tending them like a mechanic priming a car for the Indy 500.

There are also radio controlled planes, helicopters and boats. But there's a good reason why Mr. McLeod left his planes behind and bought his Grasshopper earlier this summer.

"I got into cars to give me something to do because I crash so often with the planes," he says, and estimates he's totalled at least 20 planes since he got into radio-controlled models at age 10.

His boats sit at home because "they kept stalling in the middle of the lake so I'd have to swim out and get them." The helicopter isn't used much because "all I can do is hover."

He says aircraft controls are more difficult to operate than cars because of an added dimension — up and down motion. That means four joysticks on the radio controller for airplanes compared to two for cars. Helicopters require a console with six joysticks.

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The Leisure World store at Stratford Mall reports the car sales are steady, with six sold in the last six weeks. Its Owen Sound branch is sold out.

The kits to build the bat-

tery-operated cars cost anywhere between \$100 and \$200 at local stores. Add to that the price of the radio controller and the cost rises another \$120. Depending on the kit, it takes about six hours to put a car together.

There are several kits, from off-road models to sleek Lotus racing cars, the type Jackie Stewart used to drive.

For car buffs, it's the perfect way to miniaturize an obsession — no transmissions taken apart on the workbench, no engine parts scattered in the driveway, and no gas bill. And you can't drive a real car like you drive these ones — if you want to stay out of jail, that is.

The Grasshopper doesn't jump — except when you give it the gas. Then it really goes.

On a gravel parking lot it shoots gravel away and raises enough dust to make it necessary to polish your shoes when you get home.

If he wanted to, he could send the car as far away as 500 metres without it losing the signal from his radio controller. His planes have twice that range.

There is talk of forming a club so local car operators could get together in a parking lot or a field and "have some fun."

Fellow Grasshopper owner Darin Millard, of RR 1 Stratford, says he's attracted to the hobby not so much for the cars but because he likes to play with the radio controls.

For Michel Rousseau, of 27 Stratford St., who bought a different model — a Frog, which retails for about \$200 — the novelty has worn off. He says the cars are fun but a little tame.

He says his next purchase may be a radio-controlled airplane.

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Believe it or not, that little thing in front of Bryan McLeod, of RR 1 Embro, is a Grasshopper. With radio controls in hand, he steers the speedy, battery-powered car around parking lots and says "it really shines once you get into some rough terrain."