



The collection of aircraft registrations and other data, also known as plane spotting.

The Aviation Enthusiast.

The first documented references that I can find about plane spotting seem to appear in the latter half of the 1940's, where there is mention of the hobby in some aviation publications – although I have knowledge of people who were spotting at least 10 years before that.

As with everything, the terminology changes – people who were plane spotters, are now more commonly referred to as Aviation Enthusiasts. Being an aviation enthusiast can mean many different things to different people, it was a simpler hobby when I started spotting some 58 years ago. It revolved around actual visits to an airfield to log the information, which on the day comprised a very limited subset of information, all that was actually available was what you could see using the Mk 1 eyeball.

The tools available to the enthusiast back then were limited, usually it would simply revolve around a notebook and pen. In general you would record date, place, registration or serial number, the type and the operator. The loggings would be transferred to books, specifically designed for plane spotters where they could be underlined – Civil Aircraft Markings was my first book.

These books and there were many of them, simply contained a list of registrations or serial numbers with the type and operator, organised by country. Then there was the task of transferring it all to the next edition of the book, as there was in general a new version of the book published every year.

The next acquisitions to be added to the spotting equipment list were usually, binoculars or a telescope followed by an air band radio then a camera – which tended to take people down another rabbit hole associated with the hobby.

With the advent of the smart phone, all the above is in your pocket – and so much more. Just remember that a notebook and pen doesn't have a battery to go flat!

Where would you now find people with a similar interest, well most regional airports will have some kind of spotting group – they may be active on social media or they may have a forum or online newsgroup. These are good places to start, it may not appear to be a common activity – but a look online will, I'm certain, convince you otherwise.

Where to Spot.

If you are an existing spotter, you'll be aware of the locations around your local airport where spotting is carried out or where the photographers gather. Before the security changes experienced by airports and airlines – most airports had viewing areas, some still do but not many.

But as already mentioned, there are spotting or photographic groups at most airports and they will most likely have an online presence of some sort – it is well worth asking where to go.

With the advent of the internet, we now have a wealth of information available and there is no need to go to the airport – you can spot from the comfort of your home using things like Flight Radar or any of the other applications or websites that are in the main free to use – although it is dependent on good visibility.

What to Spot.

That as they say is the \$64,000 question, it can be anything that you please – or more importantly anything that you find interesting. For some this is simply capturing the data listed above, for others the departure airport, flight number or any number of other things are of interest.

For the photographers any modern aircraft sport one off paint schemes, Frontier Airlines based in Denver have individual paint schemes on many of their aircraft depicting animals – usually painted on the tail. Other carriers commemorate sporting events or people, the list is far too big to detail here. If you have an interest in aviation photography, it may be that you only record details of these aircraft – the options are pretty endless.

Contact with a local spotting group, or one of the online forums like Fighter Control in Europe can be beneficial as there tends to be regular information on aircraft movements and many like minded people tend to frequent these groups.

Whether your interest covers just a type of aircraft, a carrier or everything that flies – doesn't matter it is a hobby that anyone can take part in.

Spotting Tools.

The basic minimum is a notebook and pen, but you can add what you want and what your wallet allows. The information can be kept on paper, on your phone, online or on a card system – it's up to you and what you want. You can still purchase the books where you underline what you've seen, you can now buy into regularly updated commercial databases.

At a commercial airport you will probably have to spot from somewhere around the perimeter of the airport or from the "Spectators Terrace", if the airport has one. So the aircraft can be a distance away, to give you a better view you may want to consider some of the optical aids available.

Binoculars:

A pair of Binoculars is probably one of the more useful purchases to make, you can pay what you want for them. A pair will be marketed as 10X50 or 12X50 where the first part is the magnification (10 or 12) and the second part is the diameter of the object (big) lens in millimetres.

Don't be afraid to ask the spotting community for advice if you are not sure, or ask in store – they range in price from £35 (\$45) to £2,500 (\$3,200) or more. They are available from all the online retailers and you may be lucky enough to have a local shop, where you can get advice – with the caveat here that you are looking to buy and the shop is looking to sell!

Remember, one pair of binoculars does the same as the next – some will be better than others – how much better, well not fifty times better that is for sure!

Telescope:

Telescopes are a great tool for the plane spotter, they generally have a greater magnification than Binoculars – but be aware they are not as easy to use. A Telescope will usually have a range of magnifications and will be marketed as 25-75X90 or 20-60X60, where the 20-60 would be the range of the magnification and the 60 would be the size of the object lens.

The cost of a Telescope is generally higher than Binoculars and it is worth noting that they are not as easy to steady as Binoculars, so you may find that a tripod or mono-pod is needed.

Again, it is worth asking around before making the investment.

Air Band Radio:

A small portable air band radio can also be of benefit, especially if you are interested in collecting information like call signs and flight numbers. However a number of airports around the world do provide live Air Traffic Control feeds – these are available on the world wide web and you can pick these up using your smart phone if you have a data plan,

A reasonable radio can be purchased for £40 (\$50) to £70 (\$95), or you can pay hundreds for more sophisticated models.

Camera:

This area can be a bit of a minefield, just suffice to say that I've had good results from a couple of small cameras like the Canon A2300, which is equipped with a 10X optical zoom fits in your pocket and the lens is small enough to poke through the smallest of gaps in a fence and cost less than £70 (\$100).

Again, you can use a smartphone for your photography needs – depending on what you want and what the camera on your phone is capable of.

But like everything else, you can spend a lot more on a camera, into the thousands if you like.

Day Pack:

With all the above equipment it's as well to have something to carry it in, a small cheap day pack is more than adequate for all the above and if you are going to be at the airport for any length of time, you can also take something to eat and drink.

Armchair Spotting.

Depending on your location you can be an armchair spotter, if you live in a city it is not so conducive from a being able to see the sky point of view, so a visit to a park or other open space might be required – but spotting is possible if a bit restricted from an aircraft visibility perspective.

It is possible to be a plane spotter almost anywhere, looking out the window or from the garden – it is probable that you'll be able to see flying aircraft if the weather is good and your view is not obstructed. Even aircraft at great distances are visible under the right atmospheric conditions, who hasn't seen a condensation trail moving across the sky on a clear day.

I used to live on an island off the west coast of Scotland, in clear weather I could log between sixty and a hundred sightings in a day if the conditions were right.

Being able to visit a local airport is not essential for plane spotting, you will meet other enthusiasts if you can visit and it is what sparked my interest. But the basic requirements are an interest in aviation, access to the information and a view of the sky and not very much more.

There are a number of tools to aid you in this, in most cases these are free - already mentioned is flight radar – but there are a number of others. Many of these are available as smartphone apps and others have websites, it is worth noting that most smartphones can access the internet as they generally have a browser installed which is suitable for website access.

There are active communities around a number of these apps and websites, they are also very helpful with information for someone starting out.

Spotting Etiquette.

Oh yes, there is some. Airports in general are working places, as with all working places – people have a job to do. The security patrol that comes round to investigate a car sitting at the airport perimeter is just doing their job, so if you are blocking an access or obstructing something they may ask you to move – but they will also probably tell you where to move to for a good view if you ask.

There are airports that like aviation enthusiasts and airports that don't seem to like them, some issue passes to enthusiasts and actually advise airport security that you are enthusiasts and that the airport is aware of your presence. So checking if the airport that you are planning to visit has such a facility will likely make your visit a more pleasant experience.

Checking if there is a public viewing area is worth while, they can be variable – but are usually worth visiting.

Visiting a foreign country, check!!! – enthusiasts have been arrested, deported even imprisoned. What is considered a harmless hobby or pastime in one country is not always looked on in the same way in other countries.

Military airfields can make for a good spotting day, but be aware of what is and what isn't allowed in these places – ignore the signs and you could be in some very hot water. When around an airport, always be prepared to explain why you are there and unless granted specific visitor access – you should always be on the public side of the fence.

Don't make a mess, simple really – I like to think of it as would I do this in my home or front garden. If there isn't a litter bin nearby, then take the litter to a bin or take it home and bin it there.

Consider other people, they might just be there to pass the time of day or watch the aircraft as well or they may have a job to do.

Online Etiquette.

Online etiquette also known as netiquette is quite straight forward, but there are a number of things to be aware of. The vast majority of online groups and forums will have a facility to introduce yourself, send a message to the group admin if they don't have a new members area to introduce yourself – as with any online activity you should take care what information that you give out.

They also usually have a FAQ (Frequently Asked Questions) post or section, it is worth reading these it will make life easier when actually posting to the group or forum.

Most of the groups and forums have a search facility, use it to avoid asking a question that someone else has already asked – it is usually just a search icon on the forum or group page.

Some groups are moderated and some are not, so it may take some time for a post to become visible. When posting or asking questions, stay on topic – nobody wants to know that you've got a sofa that you don't want – but they probably will be interested in that pile of old aviation books.

Don't get involved in arguments, generally referred to as “flame wars” there are seldom any winners and the group or forum tends to become more toxic and polarised.

Always be courteous – even when others are not.

Your Log.

This is where things start to become very variable, many enthusiasts start out the same way just with some kind of interest in the aircraft – which leads to them collecting data about the aircraft that they have seen and then onto other things.

The data they collect reflects what aspects of aircraft that they are interested in, registration, aircraft type, operator, where and when they saw the aircraft. These are all typical of the data that an enthusiast would collect, there is far too much to discuss in detail – suffice to say that if it's known it's probably collected.

There are many ways to record the information, to be fair it does generally begin with the trusted notebook and pen. When enthusiasts get back from a trip to the airport or air show, the notes in the notebook are generally transcribed or input into a more useable system – here are a few to consider.

Starting Out:

The most common way to create a permanent log was simply underlining the aircraft identity in a book, my first book was the 1966 issue of the Civil Aircraft Markings which from memory was three shillings and six pence – which equates to less than 20 pence (25¢).

There were many of these types of books available (there wasn't one that covered it all), covering civil and military aircraft or business jets and airline fleets. For me the issue was that they were mostly updated annually or every two years and that you had to transfer everything when you bought the next years book.

But they were an excellent way to start out, if you developed a serious interest – you would move onto something that suited your needs better – like a proper Master Log.

Master Log:

This can simply be a large book, my first one was. I had it organised by type and each entry comprised the data that I wanted to collect – two things soon became clear to me, one that for my use it wasn't really suitable – so I changed to a card based system and two that I needed to check the aircraft construction number to ensure that I had a unique record of the aircraft and could track changes to ownership and registration – particularly civil aircraft.

I persisted with the card based system for a number of years, moving to a computer based system in 1982.

Computer Master Log:

My current Master log is a custom created database and log, it has evolved to fit my needs – but the evolution which was driven by changing technology taught me three very valuable lessons early on in the process.

Lesson 1:

The first thing that I learned (and it was the hard way) was around the backups, the original system I used could be easily backed up – but it was a backup that was compatible only with the application that I had created. So the data could not be backed up in its own right, this became an issue as the computer and its operating system became obsolete.

So being able to backup your data is one of the key features of any system, if you can only backup the data within the application it is not portable and if for any reason the application falls into disuse or can no longer be used – your data cannot be ported to somewhere else so will have to be re-input.

Lesson 2:

If you decide to use a commercial application and there are too many to discuss individually, do not be afraid to ask questions about it – before you commit to a purchase. There are some who will provide a demonstration version, but it is a hard lesson to learn that software does not quite do what you want. This is especially the case if your data is embedded in the software and cannot be easily exported.

With digital products, there is seldom a refund available. But more importantly, starting from the beginning again is very time consuming and disheartening.

Lesson 3:

When you start spotting, keeping the data in a spread sheet like Microsoft Excel, Apple Numbers, Google Sheets or LibreOffice Calc is good enough to get started with and the data is easy to export in pretty much any format.

You can also update the layout of the data easily at any time, adding or removing different bits of information is a very handy feature. You can even add web links and photographs if required, but you should keep in mind the limitations of an application like MS Excel or LibreOffice Calc which may limit what you can do.

Online Master Log.

It is now possible to have your Master Log online, there are many sites offering this facility it does have a couple of advantages in that you can access it from anywhere in the world and at any time.

The sites seem to have many advantages and are competitively priced, with very few drawbacks. I have experimented with the online logging sites, in the main they seem easy to use from a desk top or laptop computer – but the results from hand held devices seem to be a bit variable.

There do seem to be a couple of drawbacks, the first is that you are restricted to the layout that the site uses, so you might have to try a few to get the best fit. Most of these sites offer limited use for users that simply register with the site, usually more than sufficient to test the function and suitability of the site.

But the main drawbacks that I can see are that the majority of these sites have very limited facilities (even for paying customers) for you to export your data – with some limiting you to once a year.

You will see on a number of these sites a statement which says something like “Created by Spotters for Spotters”, which does mean that the site may well be better suited to your needs. But bear in mind that many such websites are not created with long term plans, or suitable planning around preservation. Like any sites, they can vanish for a number of reasons, change of technology, domain expiration or even simple neglect.

So my advice here would be to take some time and to check a number of these sites out, many have facilities to allow the upload of data. Moving your data to an online log is normally straight forward depending on what format you use to log the data, but please remember that it is your data and it may not be that easy to retrieve from an online log, or from somewhere that no longer exists so keep at least a local copy (more than one is better).