

# THE BLACKBIRD

SR-71 remains fastest, highest-flying manned aircraft

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Despite being retired from the service in January 1990, the SR-71 remains one of the most futuristic reconnaissance aircraft the Air Force has ever flown. Even Marvel's X-Men flew a modified version of the Blackbird.

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During its active career, the SR-71 flew 257 operational missions, 942 sorties and amassed nearly 3,000 flying hours. (U.S. Air Force photo)

While the Air Force's version of the SR-71 didn't have active camouflage technology or engines capable of hypersonic speeds like the one in comic books, it remains the world's fastest and highest-flying manned aircraft.

The SR-71's first flight took place on Dec. 22, 1964, and the first aircraft entered service and was delivered to the 4200th Strategic Reconnaissance Wing at Beale Air Force Base, Calif., in January 1966.



The SR-71A was powered by two Pratt & Whitney J58 engines, capable of 32,500 pounds of thrust each with afterburner. (U.S. Air Force photo)

Its impressive speed, coupled with a radar signal that wasn't much bigger than a bird, gave the United States a strategic advantage over the Soviets during the Cold War. Because of its high-altitude and speed capabilities, the SR-71 could fly over enemy territory without much threat from air defenses.

At 80,000 feet, the SR-71 was capable of surveying 100,000 square miles of Earth's surface per hour. In mid-1976, an SR-71 set two world records for its class, with a speed record of about 2,193 mph and an altitude record of sustained flight at about 85,069 feet, according to Air Force fact sheets.



An SR-71 is shown in flight with an experimental test fixture mounted on the back of the airplane in 1999. (NASA photo/Jim Ross)

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After the SR-71 program was cancelled, the Air Force loaned three aircraft to NASA for high speed and high altitude aeronautical research.



