



The Skeptics SA guide to UFOs

UFOs: they certainly exist, but could they really be visitors to Earth from distant civilisations? Most Skeptics would be thrilled if they were. But clearly there is a world of difference between a flying object which someone can see but not identify, and a flying object piloted by interplanetary visitors. UFOs are certainly real in the sense that people see things which they are unable to identify, but the belief that they are alien spacecraft is one that, alas, does not stand up to very much critical examination.

Although strange sights have often been seen in the sky, as elsewhere, the birth of the UFO as a social phenomenon dates back to half a century ago. It was on 24 June 1947 that Kenneth Arnold on a private flight near Mt Rainier in Washington State USA reported seeing nine boomerang-like objects in the sky. A wire service man reporting the event called them 'saucers', and a flurry of further sightings around the country launched the existence of UFOs as we know them today. This frenzy has been a peculiarly American one, and occurring so soon after the end of World War II, was taken seriously for a while by the US military as a threat to their national security. The US Air Force scrutinised reports of unusual sightings in case they were possibly secret Soviet aircraft, or even — and this theory was fanned

by a stream of sensational books and media reports cashing in on the mania — visitors from other planets. But, alas, the resulting Condon Report put out by the USAF in 1968 concluded that there are no UFOs which cannot be explained as hoaxes, hallucinations, or honest misidentification of such natural objects as meteors, Venus, balloons, conventional aircraft, reentering satellites, or atmospheric illusions.

Nevertheless, one would have to investigate every UFO report and identify the cause of every single sighting in order to prove that all such reports have mundane explanations. Due to a lack of complete information, and the fact that many sightings take place under poor observing conditions, it is clear that there will be some cases that are more difficult to explain than others. Does this mean that there are a minority of cases that truly are the 'real thing'? Unfortunately not. An examination of many UFO sightings which have since been rationally explained shows the regularity with which people are misled by any number of mistakes in their perception. And it makes far more sense to expect that any remaining cases result from unexplained mistakes, rather than unexplained extraterrestrial visits. On the other hand, all we need is one single otherworldly

visitor to stand up and be counted in broad daylight for the 'ET' hypothesis to be proven. Just one. But we are still waiting. Enter government conspiracy theories. If the US government is not in contact with alien intelligences overtly, then many claim that is proof that they are doing just that covertly! And this, from the same system of government that brought you Watergate, Travelgate, and a steady stream of botched cover-ups and leaks. Including the famous model kits of topsecret F-117A stealth fighter jets released by a US toy company before anyone outside the manufacturers and USAF knew what they looked like, and even before the US government would acknowledge their existence. It seems quite a long shot that no facts would come out to support the whispers of 'conspiracy' after all these years, and over so many administrations, if there was any truth in them at all. Especially when those same governments can't even keep a secret under wraps which, when revealed, gets them tossed out of office.

Sadly, many of the most famous sightings, with their photographic 'evidence', continue to resurface in the popular media (most notably the Internet). These are usually the very cases that have been definitively shown to be lens reflections, altered photographs, or some

other such misidentified phenomenon. And yet they still continue to fuel the UFO 'debate', to the frustration of those who try to encourage a rational discussion on the topic.

In that case, where does the Search for Extra-Terrestrial Intelligence (SETI) Institute fit in? This is an association of scientists seriously looking for the signature of intelligence in the radio signals we receive from space. But they do not concern themselves with investigating reports of UFO sightings, because they do not provide 'scientific evidence'. We generally call evidence 'scientific' if it can be tested and analysed under strictly controlled conditions, and can also be independently verified by others working elsewhere. This is the methodology of science: developed over the centuries to test which ideas work, and which do not. The personal accounts which exist do not provide physical or verifiable evidence of visits by alien intelligences, and thus do not pass the requirements of being scientific evidence. The dangers of basing our view of the world on factors which have not been tested have been demonstrated again and again throughout history.

The town of Roswell in New Mexico is famous for its UFO sightings, and for its 'UFO Museum and Research Centre'. It is also the site of the reputed UFO crash in 1947 (apparently an experimental military balloon). Roswell had been a focal point for strange sightings ever since Robert Goddard, the father of modern rocketry, established his rocket laboratories outside the town in 1930. (Some would say a strange coincidence). The nearby White Sands

Missile Range now continues with the testing and development of the military aspects of Goddard's legacy, perhaps accounting for some of the continued 'UFO activity' in the area. And unfortunately, the UFO museum is actually little more than a collection of fuzzy photographs of streetlights, and yellowing newspaper articles excitedly reporting second-hand stories of sightings. And the Research Centre? A small bookshelf of mainly softback UFO novellas. Not really the sort of institution which provides much credibility for their claims.

But, there is still the wacky side of the UFO phenomenon to investigate. Crop circles, wider conspiracies, and UFO abductions! Perhaps there Skeptics will find more convincing evidence for our hopes that we are not alone in the Universe. And, well, perhaps not.

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