

Astronomers and UFOs.

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There are times when any of us may happen to see something unusual in the sky. It may be an exceptionally bright meteor, perhaps leaving a trail hanging in the sky before it gradually fades and disappears. If we are even more lucky, we may see a fireball-type object trailing sparks as satellite debris re-enters the atmosphere. Sometimes a bright star will seem to appear where no star should be, only for us to realize that it is a satellite briefly reflecting the rays of the setting sun before the light disappears again, perhaps after just a few seconds. There is usually an explanation for everything we may see, but there could be other much more mysterious objects up there as sometimes reported, and far more difficult to explain.

It is sometimes claimed that astronomers never see UFOs, and that for this reason such objects cannot possibly exist as truly unexplained events. After all, astronomers must spend more time looking at the sky than anyone else, so if there is anything in the sky which should not be there they would surely be aware of it. But astronomers of course do not always have a wide view of the sky. A telescope eyepiece only provides a narrow angle view, and a very small fraction of the sky. Astronomers do, however, sometimes see UFOs - although what may be reported or discussed in public is not the same as what may be admitted in more guarded statements. In 1976, over a thousand members of the American Astronomical Society were asked in a survey if they had experienced any UFO-type observations. A small but significant number, amounting to about five per cent of the members, responded that they had in fact seen an object which they were unable to explain, and which they would classify as a UFO.

There have been several noted reports from astronomers, and from observatories. As far back as 1949, Dr Clyde Tombaugh, famous for his discovery of Pluto in 1930, was at his home in New Mexico with other members of his family when they saw a very strange object in the sky. He was so astonished and concerned that he reported the matter to the FBI, on the understanding that details would not be revealed to the public. Other sightings of unknown objects were later not revealed by the astronomer when he found that details of the earlier incident had been released.

Another astronomer who experienced an unexplained sighting was Dr H.P. Wilkins, a highly respected observer and an authority on the subject of the lunar surface. It was in 1954, during a lecture tour of the United States, when he saw three unknown objects while travelling by air over West Virginia. The objects were oval, well defined, and moved against the wind direction. Two of the objects moved slowly, while the third one dived quickly behind the clouds.

In 1976, an incident was reported from Galdar in the Canary Islands, also involving astronomers at the Monte Izane Astrophysical Observatory. The driver and passenger in a car saw an object a few feet above the ground as they rounded a curve in the road. The object was spherical and seemed transparent, with what looked like tall figures inside it. The car radio failed suddenly. Three astronomers at the observatory described the object as a brilliant sphere with a swirling centre. It approached the observatory before making a ninety degree turn, moving away at speed. The astronomers could not explain the object, which was seen from the observatory for several minutes, and by other eyewitnesses near Galdar for up to half an hour.

During a scientific conference at the Shemakha Observatory at Baku, on the Caspian Sea coast in October 1999, scientists including astrophysicists observed a large disc-shaped object which was overhead for several minutes. The object was also recorded on videotape.

Following a study of the results, the scientists were reported to be unanimous in concluding that the object was not of terrestrial origin, and could not have been caused by any known atmospheric phenomenon.

Reports of UFOs are on a worldwide basis, with many reliable accounts from aircraft pilots, police officers and military personnel. The reports are helping to build up a pattern with a degree of consistency. Many of the best cases do not depend on just visual sightings, but also when objects are reported to interact with the environment, producing apparent effects on vehicle and aircraft systems, radar tracking and physical traces. In 1997, a scientific review of UFO evidence was set up by Professor Peter Sturrock of Stanford University, a leading science research centre in the United States. The team led by Professor Sturrock examined a sample of significant UFO cases, and concluded that the subject deserved more serious scientific study.

When it comes to media reporting, the subject is usually ignored, except when it comes to a more significant report which may not always be dealt with in a serious way. Then, of course, there are the debunkers. These are people who do not study the evidence carefully to arrive at a reasonable explanation, but prefer any seemingly easy answer regardless of the evidence. In this way you can have a daylight sighting, in one example, explained as a magnified image of the planet Jupiter, or Venus being put forward to explain almost anything.

It is well known that many scientists do not have an open-minded approach to subjects which do not conform with present thinking, or with currently accepted scientific theory. Adrian Berry, science correspondent of the Daily Telegraph for many years, has admitted that scientists in general are infuriated by paranormal events, including UFOs. In an article in the newspaper in November 1990, he stated that these subjects are “resented because, if confirmed, the whole fabric of science would be threatened.” So now we know why most scientists do not wish to look honestly at reported events which do not fit the accepted pattern, but prefer to guard presently known theory for as long as possible. This seems a pity, as it does not help to advance knowledge into new areas which must surely exist. Scientists must, of course, exercise caution where reputations may be at stake, but it would be unwise to feel satisfied that there are no major discoveries yet to be made in the natural world or in the Universe around us.

Given that UFOs may well exist as a truly unexplained phenomenon, as evidence seems to confirm, what could they be, and where do they come from? Not long ago it was thought that our solar system was probably unique, but since around 1995 evidence has been found that there are many stars which seem to have planetary companions. The existence of these other solar systems is indicated mainly by the observed gravitational effects on the parent star. It would take a very powerful telescope to see any of these planets directly. It is quite possible, even assuming the most pessimistic chances, that intelligent life does exist elsewhere in the Universe, but we are told that faster than light travel is impossible. Knowing how much has been discovered and achieved in science, with manned flight and space research in the past century, how much more may be considered possible and achieved in the more distant future - or may already be available to any civilisations more advanced than ourselves?

It should not be assumed that the origin of any UFOs must be necessarily from some extraterrestrial source. Although it is of course a possibility to be considered, there is also intriguing evidence in many of the reports of links with other reported paranormal events, which may provide another explanation. For those who are prepared to study the evidence, it is apparent that genuine unexplained events exist. The scientific panel in 1997 was, for example, impressed in particular with UFO cases involving effects on electrical systems. Reported vehicle interference effects are a major part of the many ‘high strangeness’ cases,

and it is in these that the most significant clues will be found. Although many case reports remain unobtainable, in spite of Freedom of Information legislation, there is ample material available to assist investigation of the subject.

The search for evidence and for more definitive answers will continue. Where exactly UFOs come from may be neither here nor there, and perhaps in a somewhat different direction, but if anyone says that astronomers never see UFOs - don't believe them.

(Geoff Falla.)

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