

UFO Sightings & News

Benjamin Radford

About the Author



Benjamin Radford (b. 1970) is an American writer and investigator who serves as the deputy editor of *Skeptical Inquirer* magazine. He is a former co-host of *Monster Talk*, a podcast that examines the science and history of legendary creatures such as Bigfoot and werewolves. Radford is the author of several books and the creator of a board game. He writes about the

paranormal, urban legends, and the explanations behind mysterious phenomenon.

BACKGROUND

A UFO, or “unidentified flying object,” is an unusual light or object in the air that is difficult to explain. Some people believe that UFOs are intelligent aliens traveling in spaceships. From 1952 to 1969, the United States Air Force investigated about 12,000 reports of UFO sightings.

NOTES

¹ *UFOs have fascinated and puzzled people for decades, yet hard evidence seems ever elusive. Many people are convinced that not only are extraterrestrials¹ visiting Earth, but that governments have perpetuated a top-secret global conspiracy to cover it up. Skeptic and UFO expert Benjamin Radford takes a look at the history and psychology of UFOs, including some of the most notable sightings.*

² **T**oday most people equate UFOs with extraterrestrial intelligence and advanced technologies, but this is a very recent idea. That’s not to say that historically people did not report seeing unusual things in the skies, for they surely did: comets, meteors, eclipses, and the like had been reported (and sometimes recorded) for millennia. In fact some researchers believe that

1. **extraterrestrials** (ehks truh tuh REHS tree uhlyz) *n.* creatures from another planet.

the Star of Bethlehem² may have been an illusion created by a merging of Jupiter and Venus in the sky, which occurred right around Jesus' birth.

The First UFOs

- 3 But it's only been in the past century or so that anybody assumed that unknown lights or objects in the sky were visitors from other planets. Several of the planets had been noticed for millennia, but were not thought of as places where other living creatures might reside (for example, ancient Greeks and Romans thought the planets were gods).
- 4 Early science fiction writers like Jules Verne and Edgar Allan Poe fueled the public's interest in voyages to other worlds, and as technology developed some people began to wonder if that might not indeed be possible for advanced civilizations. The first reports of what could be called UFOs emerged in the late 1800s, though in those days they didn't use terms like "UFO" or "flying saucer," but instead "airships."
- 5 The most dramatic early UFO encounter occurred in 1897 in Texas, when E.E. Haydon, a newspaper reporter for the *Dallas Morning News*, described an amazing UFO encounter complete with a crashed spacecraft, dozens of eyewitnesses, a recovered dead Martian body, and metallic wreckage (fifty years later a nearly identical story would circulate about a crash in the neighboring state of New Mexico). The fantastic tale unraveled when researchers could find no eyewitnesses to support Haydon's story, and nothing of the alien nor the "several tons" of mysterious spacecraft wreckage was ever found. It turned out that Haydon had made the whole story up as a publicity stunt to attract tourists.

UFO Sightings

- 6 Early newspaper hoaxes³ aside, there have been countless UFO reports over the decades, and a few of them stand out as especially important. The first report of a "flying saucer" only dates back to 1947 when a pilot named Kenneth Arnold reported seeing nine objects resembling boomerangs in the sky. He described their movement as "like a saucer if you skip it across the water," which a careless reporter misunderstood as saying that the objects themselves resembled "flying saucers," and that mistake launched many "flying saucer" reports in later decades.

2. **Star of Bethlehem** the Bible refers to an extremely large and bright "star" that appeared when Jesus Christ was born.

3. **hoaxes** (HOHK sis) *n.* untrue stories or tricks.

Investigators believe that Arnold probably saw a flock of pelicans and misjudged their size, their large wings creating the “V” shape he described.

- 7 The most famous UFO crash allegedly occurred when something—skeptics say a top-secret spy balloon, believers say a spacecraft with alien pilots—crashed on a ranch in the desert outside of Roswell, New Mexico, in 1947, and the debate rages to this day.
- 8 The first UFO abduction⁴ case—and to this day the most famous—was that of Barney and Betty Hill, an interracial couple who in 1961 claimed to have been chased down and abducted by a UFO. However, since there were no other eyewitnesses to the event and they didn’t report the abduction at the time (only remembering it under hypnosis), many remain skeptical.
- 9 Another famous UFO sighting occurred near Phoenix, Arizona, in March 1997 when a series of bright lights were reported in the night skies. Though it is known that the military dropped flares over a nearby proving ground during routine exercises around the time of the sightings, UFO buffs⁵ dismiss the government’s explanation of the lights and insist there’s more to the story.
- 10 Since then, a host of UFO sightings have been reported. Here are a handful in recent years that got a lot of attention:
 - 11 **Jan. 7, 2007:** Strange lights over Arkansas fueled much speculation on the internet until the Air Force debunked the UFO claims, explaining that flares had been dropped from airplanes as part of routine training.
 - 12 **April 21, 2008:** Phoenix lights were reported again. It was a hoax, created by road flares tied to helium balloons. The hoaxter admitted it, and eyewitnesses reported seeing him do it.
 - 13 **Jan. 5, 2009:** New Jersey UFOs that proved so baffling they were reported on the History Channel turned out to be helium balloons, red flares and fishing lines, all part of a social experiment. The men who perpetrated the hoax, Joe Rudy and Chris Russo, were fined \$250 for creating what could have been a danger to the nearby Morristown airport.
 - 14 **October 13, 2010:** UFOs over Manhattan turned out to be helium balloons that escaped from a party at a school in Mount Vernon.

4. **abduction** *n.* kidnapping.

5. **buffs** *n.* knowledgeable fans.

- 15 **Jan. 28, 2011:** Videos of UFOs hovering over the Holy Land (the Dome of the Rock on Jerusalem's Temple Mount) were revealed as a hoax—the effects of video editing software's use were discovered.
- 16 **July 2011:** The sighting of a UFO on the ocean floor was attributed to a Swedish scientist, but that researcher, Peter Lindberg, merely said the thing he detected in blurry images was “completely round,” an assertion not supported by the low-resolution sonar image. A second “anomaly” made the case seem even more bizarre, but no evidence has emerged to suggest alien origin.
- 17 **April 2012:** A UFO near the sun, spotted in a NASA image, turned out to be a camera glitch.
- 18 **April 2012:** A viral UFO video taken from a plane over South Korea likely showed a droplet of water on the airplane's window.
- 19 **May 2012:** A nephew of the famous Wayans brothers comedy team, Duayne “Shway ShWayans” Wayans, filmed a UFO over Studio City, Calif. But like many, many UFO sightings, this one turned out to be the planet Venus. In fact, Venus has been mistaken for a UFO even by airline pilots.

UFO Psychology

- 20 It's not hard to understand why there are so many UFO sightings. After all, the only criterion for a UFO is that some flying object be unidentified by whoever is looking at it at the time. Any object seen in the sky, especially at night, can be very difficult to identify because of the limitations of human perception. Knowing how far away something is helps us determine its size and speed; that's why we know that moving cars seen at a distance aren't really smaller, nor are they moving slowly; it's simply an optical illusion. If the eyewitness doesn't know the distance, then he or she cannot determine the size. Is that thing or light in the sky twenty feet long and 200 yards away, or is it 200 feet long and a mile away? It's impossible to know, and this makes estimates of size, distance and speed of UFOs very unreliable.
- 21 Psychologists also know that our brains tend to “fill in” missing information, which can mislead us. For example, many sightings of three lights in the night sky are reported as appearing as a triangular spacecraft. The fact is that any three lights in the sky, whether connected or not, will form a triangle if you assume

(without evidence) that each of those lights are fixed at the ends of three points. Had a witness seen four lights he or she would have assumed it was a rectangular-shaped object in the night sky above him; our brains sometimes make connections where none exist.

- 22 All that is needed to create a UFO sighting is one person who may not recognize a light or object in the sky. But just because one person—or even several people—can’t immediately identify or explain something they see doesn’t mean that someone else with more training or experience (or even the same person seeing the same object from a different angle) may not instantly recognize it. While it’s possible that extraterrestrials in spacecraft exist and have visited Earth, the UFO sightings so far provide no real evidence. The lesson, as always, is that “unknown lights in the sky” is not the same as “extraterrestrial spacecraft.” 🐼