

FREQUENT FLIERS?

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For species that supposedly don't exist, aliens sure do get around.

Extraterrestrial beings and the aircraft they purportedly fly have become an indelible part of American and world culture. You can't watch TV for long anymore without seeing some reference to aliens. It's as if they've hired a slick public relations firm to maximize their exposure. Even Hollywood has a new fixation with ETs. The much-awaited "Independence Day," expected to be this summer's blockbuster, is unleashing an alien invasion of earth at a theater near you this week.

Of course, everyone knows that humans are the only intelligent life in the universe, UFOs don't exist, all crop circles are faked by two English blokes, cattle mutilations are carried out by laser-wielding coyotes and bigfoot will have a sizable bill to pay if he ever returns that rental costume.

Well, not everyone.

"My personal opinion, not speaking for Hansen Planetarium or Salt Lake County, is that the universe is teeming with life," said Patrick Wiggins, a spokesman for the planetarium.

"There are more stars in the sky than there are grains of sand on planet earth. The notion that anybody would say that out of that incredible number of stars there is only one planet that has life on it, that's ludicrous. That's egocentric to the max."

Terry and Gwen Sherman wish some of that teeming intergalactic life would find somewhere else to hang out.

For more than a year now the Shermans' 480-acre ranch just south of Fort Duchesne in Uintah County has been a hotbed for UFOs and bizarre paranormal activity - weirdness that even the Shermans, who've witnessed the strange happenings with their own eyes and video camera, have trouble accepting as reality.

"For a long time we wondered what we were seeing, if it was something to do with a top-secret project," said Terry Sherman, who reluctantly agreed to speak publicly about the activity for the first time. "I don't know really what to think about it."

The Shermans, their teenage son and 10-year-old daughter have seen three specific types of UFOs repeatedly during the past 15 months - a small boxlike craft with a white light, a 40-foot-long object and a huge ship the size of several football fields. They've seen one craft emit a wavy red ray or light beam as it flies along. They've seen other airborne lights, some of which have

emerged from orange, circular doorways that seem to appear in midair. They've videotaped two of the sightings.

Mystery circles

They once discovered three circles of flattened grass, each about 8 feet across, in a triangular pattern about 30 feet from each other. In a nearby pasture, other strange soil impressions have been found - circles about 3 feet wide and a foot or two deep with the dirt in the center perfectly flattened.

One of the flying lights followed Gwen's car on her way home from work one night. And while out in one of the fields with the family dogs, Terry heard male voices speaking an unfamiliar language. The voices seemed to be about 25 feet above him, but Terry couldn't see a thing. The dogs were frantic. They barked and growled before running off to the ranch house, Terry said.

The Shermans have linked the sightings with the death or disappearance of seven of their cows. Four have disappeared without a trace. Three others have been found dead and partially mutilated.

"We've seen (the UFOs) enough and we know pretty much what the craft look like, and I think it's definitely associated with the cattle mutilations - when we see the crafts and then the cattle, we have problems," Sherman said.

"You talk to a lot of people around here that at one time or another have seen something they can't explain. There's been a lot of cattle mutilations, and a lot of them weren't reported. Several (ranchers) told me that when they had a (mutilation), they called the authorities and the authorities couldn't do anything, so it was just a waste of time and effort."

Indeed, the records clerk for the Uintah County Sheriff's Department said her department has not received reports of UFOs or cattle mutilations in recent memory. Sheriff Ralph Stansfield in nearby Duchesne County said he is unaware of any UFOs or mutilations being reported in the past 18 months.

Although the Shermans haven't told officials about the cattle mutilations or UFO activity, they have confided in Joseph "Junior" Hicks, a retired junior high school teacher from Roosevelt who has investigated more than 400 UFO sightings in the Uinta Basin since the early 1950s.

Reports of UFOs during that time have numbered in the thousands, according to Hicks, and some have been associated with cattle mutilations. Over the years, Hicks said, at least a half-dozen eyewitnesses have told him they saw living beings in the windows or portholes of UFOs.

To Hicks, the Shermans' sightings are extraordinary for their number, duration and quality. But what they've witnessed is hardly unusual for the Uinta Basin, he said.

"I'd estimate over 10 percent of the population of the Uinta Basin has seen something," Hicks said. "I think what's happening is we are being visited from beings from another world or some other place. I think primarily it's research and exploration."

Sightings abound

Utah's UFO activity isn't limited to the Uinta Basin.

Controversial film footage of flying discs was taken by a Navy warrant officer near Tremonton in 1952. A "fireball" that raced above Salt Lake City's skies and drew considerable attention in the Nephi area in 1962 is considered suspicious by some UFO investigators.

Pat Roach, a Lehi woman working for Geneva Steel at the time, attracted national attention when she went public with her account of an alien abduction she said occurred in 1973.

Bill Lyons, a Mutual UFO Network investigator in Iron County, is intrigued by a February 1993 incident in which a man and woman saw a dozen UFOs near Hurricane, including an egg-shaped craft with telephone pole-size landing gear and a large hot dog-shaped craft. After the sightings, the couple surveyed the ground nearby and found a trail of small three-toed footprints in the snow. Other markings indicated a tail might have been dragging behind whatever made the prints.

"The thing that struck me about this sighting was its depth and the copious amounts of information," Lyons said. "There was just so much detail to it."

The woman, who lives in Kanab, confirmed the sighting in an interview with the Deseret News but did not want her name published.

Ryan Layton, a Davis County resident, has interviewed more than two dozen Utahns who claim to have seen UFOs. He knows of an Emery County couple whose 16-year-old daughter believes she has been abducted repeatedly by an alien with red glowing eyes.

"I know they're out there," Layton said.

Businessman Paul Pedersen agreed to speak publicly for the first time about an event he says occurred in 1964. As Pedersen was leaving a neighbor's Emigration Canyon home early one morning, he noticed a huge oval-shaped craft in the sky above him.

"It drifted over and down and then hovered above the driveway," Pedersen said. "As it stood still, people inside came to the portholes and looked out at me. That kind of unnerved me because it was so dark I knew I couldn't be seen by human eyes. . . . They looked just like people. They were silhouetted against this green light in the background."

Pedersen then received a telepathic message from the beings. They asked if he'd like to come with them.

"It was one individual's voice," he said. "I didn't say anything but answered by thinking. My thought was that I can't leave, I have a wife and two children who depend on me. Their response was, 'That's OK,' and the craft just hovered up above the trees and went over the mountain behind me."

Ray Kelsey of West Valley City says he was working in a Wyoming oil field in the 1970s when he and 250 others saw a UFO above an oil rig. The rig later exploded. Kelsey said superiors told the workers not to report the incident.

"They were taking something out of the ground, oil or something black, but it wasn't a solid stream. It was particles - like a beam," Kelsey said. "The ship itself had different colored lights and was transparent."

Local filmmaker Trent Harris, who is sponsoring a UFO film festival late next month in Bicknell, heard similar stories recently while filming in Zion National Park.

"You can't throw a rock in southern Utah without hitting somebody who's been abducted," Harris said.

No hard evidence

Hard evidence to support such claims is sorely lacking, however, and eyewitness accounts just can't be trusted, according to Barry Karr. He is the executive director of the New York-based Committee for the Scientific Investigation of Claims of the Paranormal, which publishes "Skeptical Inquirer" magazine.

"There is no good, physical evidence that we are being visited by beings from other planets," Karr said in a telephone interview. "There's no question that people see things in the sky that they can't identify, but that just means at the moment those things are unidentified."

Karr said many CSICOP members are open to the idea that intelligent life may exist elsewhere. They just don't believe that life is now visiting Earth.

"We don't know exactly what they saw," Karr said when told about what the Shermans say they've seen. "You can't take eyewitness testimony for it. I have people who have told me elaborate stories about what they've seen and you do some research and it turns out to be a blimp. I think it's very unlikely that what they're seeing is from another planet."

UFO paradise

The Shermans' ranch would be paradise if they were UFO researchers, but strange lights in the sky weren't what what the couple

was looking for when they bought the ranch two years ago. They wanted a quiet place where they could get away from it all. Gwen, a Uinta Basin native, and Terry, who moved here from Arizona when he was 17, had no idea what they were in for.

The ranch sat idle for seven years after the previous owners passed away, and it took awhile for the Shermans to remodel the old house and move in. Before they took up residence, Terry noticed one of the strange circular depressions in the pasture west of the house. He assumed someone had removed a tree.

In April of 1995, the family got a taste of what was to come. Terry stepped out of the house to check on a cow that was calving in the field south of the house when he noticed lights in the field. He assumed they belonged to recreation vehicles, maybe kids from a neighboring farm riding four-wheelers.

That didn't make a lot of sense, though. The ranch is isolated, three miles from the main road, and access is cut off by a creek and a huge rock ridge.

"It went clear down here and just above where this cow's mutilated," Sherman said, pointing to where that first UFO was seen. "It went over some poplar trees there that are probably 40 to 50 feet tall. That's the first time we realized it wasn't an RV."

Gwen didn't see the object that time but had a sighting of her own later.

"It looked like headlights, but they were a little ways away from the craft and there was a red glowing thing, about an 18-inch circle," she said. "It just lit the whole side of the mountain up like broad daylight."

In the months to follow, the Shermans saw myriad lights and flying objects, including more than a dozen on one evening. Sightings generally occur during a new moon and often when the sky is overcast or stormy. Their most recent encounter took place in May during a thunderstorm.

Terry and his son believe they may have communicated with one of the craft. As they traveled west on the ranch road one evening, they saw a lighted object duck behind the rock ridge as if to avoid them. Moments later they managed to sneak up on the object. Before it could hide again, they stood and waved their arms at it. The light flashed on and off three times, as if signaling them, and then disappeared.

Cattle mutilations

Soon after sightings began, the Shermans found one of their cows dead in a field. It had a peculiar hole in the center of its left eyeball but was otherwise untouched with no trace of

blood. There was no evidence of predators, footprints or tire tracks. A strange, chemical-like odor was present.

Later, another dead cow was found with a similar hole in its left eye and a 6-inch hole, only about an inch deep, carved out of its rectum. The same chemical smell was noticeable.

Cattle mutilations have been reported across the United States since the 1960s, particularly in Western states. In "classic" mutilation cases, the anus is cored out and the cow's udders and genitalia are removed, all with laser-like precision and no visible sign of blood. The Shermans, who keep close watch on their cattle, believe they may have interrupted the mutilators before they were able to finish.

Then cows began disappearing altogether.

"We about rode the saddle horses to death looking for cattle until we realized" they were vanishing, Terry said.

One appeared to be lifted from the snow where it stood. The Shermans saw the cow's hoofprints lead into the field, but the prints stopped at the edge of the field near some trees. The area where the cow apparently took its last steps was surrounded by a circle of broken twigs and branches. Above, Terry noticed the tops of the trees appeared to have been cut off.

"If it's snow, it's hard for a 1,200- or 1,400-pound animal to just walk off without leaving tracks or to stop and walk backwards completely and never miss their tracks," Terry said. "It was just gone. It was very bizarre."

The last of the three dead cows was found in January in a clump of trees at the edge of the same field. The cow, which had been seen alive by the Shermans' son just five minutes earlier, had a 6-inch wide, 18-inch deep hole cored out of its rectum and extending into the body cavity. There was no blood on the cow or the snow, and the same chemical odor was apparent. There was a circle of twigs around the fallen cow and the tops of the trees appeared severed.

Karr is skeptical. He believes the conclusions of a 1980 New Mexico study by retired FBI agent Ken Rommel Jr., who decided mutilations there were the work of toxic plants and predatory animals. Rommel's findings are rejected by many New Mexico ranchers, some of whom have lost cows to the phenomenon in the 1990s.

Hard to deal with

The cattle deaths and disappearances have been troubling, both psychologically and financially. Even while the Shermans wonder if they can believe what they're seeing, their bank account has taken a hit. The mutilators didn't take just any cows, they took the best ones, Terry said.

"I've got a neighbor over here who's reluctant to talk but he told me they've had trouble since he was a small kid and he's probably 55," Terry said. "He told me, 'People will think you're crazy but you're not. If you are, then we both have the same problem.' "

Leland Mecham, who lives in nearby Neola, knows the Shermans are not insane. He had two prolonged observations of UFOs, one in the mid-1960s and another a decade later. The second craft he saw was gigantic and had rays of colored light shooting out from its underbelly. After it scanned the landscape, it elevated, streaked across the sky and was gone in an instant, Mecham said.

"There's no way it was swamp gas or balloons like everybody tries to pass it off," Mecham said. "I was probably as skeptical as any man alive, but when I saw these, in my opinion, they had to be operated by somebody. It couldn't be any other way. And I don't think there's anything we've got that could move that quick."

The Shermans may never know the cause or reason for what they've experienced, but they know one thing - they just want it to stop.