

The New York Times

# Out of This World, Out of Our Minds



UP IN THE SKY A U.F.O. sighting from 1964, when the flying saucer was still the favored mode of alien transportation. Credit...Bettmann/Corbis

By [John Schwartz](#)

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HOW did you celebrate World U.F.O. Day?

You didn't?

Dang. Nobody seems to remember any more that July 2, 1947 was the day of the [Roswell crash](#) in the New Mexico desert (a spacecraft from another world, say some; a test balloon, says the government) that became the touchstone for those who believe aliens have come to Earth.

And they certainly don't remember that World U.F.O. Day is celebrated by some on June 24, to commemorate the [first widely reported U.F.O. sighting](#) by Kenneth Arnold, a pilot who claimed to see what he would call "flying saucers" over Mount Rainier the same year.

From those days, our cultural love affair with little green men has gone through the stages of many passionate relationships — the fear and hopefulness of "[The Day The Earth Stood Still](#)" in 1951; the quirky cuddliness of [Ray Walston](#) as "[My Favorite Martian](#)" in the '60s. We [laugh](#), we [cry](#), and then we [scream](#) again.

Off screen, however, we seem to have drifted apart: sightings rarely capture the popular imagination. Now that cellphone cameras are all but ubiquitous, there isn't a moment that can't be snapped — so if the truth really were out there, we'd see it. And we haven't.

That isn't to say that the number of sightings has dwindled. Groups like the [National UFO Reporting Center](#) receive hundreds of reports each month, and The [Weekly World News](#) supplies the latest in otherworldly headlines. ("[Alien Tells Larry King to Leave CNN](#)," the newspaper reported on June 29.)

"The community of sighters has really expanded through digital technology — on a global basis," said Neil McGinness, the chief executive of Weekly World News. "It really speeds up now because the chatter on the Web — it just burns like crazy." And The Weekly World News, the happy home of Bat Boy and other paranormal stories, is happily receptive. Alien stories draw readers and reader comments — "probably more so than any other phenomenon," he said.

But these days, U.F.O. sightings rarely cause a stir outside of Mr. McGinness's pages or Web sites for buffs, says John Pike of [GlobalSecurity.org](#). "The 'Modern Myth of Things Seen in the Sky' no longer resonates with the public the way it did when a tricorder or talking computers seemed miraculous," he said.

Even when incidents break out of the buff ghetto nowadays, smarty-pants killjoys often come up with perfectly reasonable explanations. Take the recent [spiraling light over Australia](#), which many took to be a U.F.O. It was quickly tied to the launch of Falcon 9, the spacecraft created by billionaire entrepreneur Elon Musk's company, SpaceX.

Phil Plait, the creator of the debunk-eriffic [Bad Astronomy blog](#) at Discovermagazine.com, says that on the one hand, digital media "may be hurting the cause of reality: such nonsense gets spread much faster than it used to." But "it's easier for the correct explanation to spread as well."

He noted that in March, people [marveled at a bright object over Lake Erie and Cleveland](#). Mr. Plait wrote:

"Could it be an alien visitor from another world? No, I don't think so. In fact, I think it *is* another world. Venus, to be specific."

The basic problem, Mr. Plait said, is that people rarely look up into the dark sky and know what's normal, much less abnormal. The singer James McMurtry summed it up nicely in his song "[Levelland](#)":

Mama used to roll her hair  
Back before the central air  
We'd sit outside and watch the stars at night.  
She'd tell me to make a wish,  
I'd wish we both could fly.  
Don't think she's seen the sky  
Since we got the satellite dish. ...

Of course, the odds are steeply against humans being the only life in the vastness of the universe. The blunt reality of distance measured in light-years, however, makes travel between the stars unlikely.

Still, we hold on to the mysteries left to us, savoring guilty pleasures like Larry King's alien (check the picture — that could be a family resemblance) and not trying too hard to understand phenomena like the Marfa lights. On this planet, where a hole in the ground of our own making spews millions of gallons of toxic slush, surely it's O.K. to hope that there's intelligent life, well, somewhere.

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