

THE TRUTH IS OUT THERE

UFOs Are All We've Got



By Katie Heaney, a freelance writer and novelist.

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Illustration: by The Cut; Photos: Getty Images

Last Sunday, around 2:30 in the afternoon, I got a push alert on my phone that a “possible UFO” had been seen in Long Beach, California. Unfortunately, it was probably just a fly.

The news came from TMZ, which might have felt a little off-brand if UFOs weren’t everyone’s business lately — just last month, the New York Times published a big story about the Pentagon’s dedicated UFO unit. The Pentagon, the Times reported, had officially released videos of strange encounters between Navy pilots and unidentified aircraft, first published by the Times last year. As if that wasn’t enough to cement UFO’s pop-culture primacy, Post Malone recently told Joe Rogan that he’s seen several.

Meanwhile, reported UFO sightings are on the rise in Canada, Belgium, and (anecdotally, at least) in the United States. Coincidentally — or maybe not — these are places that have also enforced stay-at-home orders over the same time frame. Chris Rutkowski, a UFOlogy researcher in Canada, told CTV News, “We’re looking at increases of about 50 percent from this time last year, so for some reason, people are reporting more UFOs during lockdown.”

There are a few reasons why this might be happening. One, of course, is that aliens — many of them hot — are going wild, and there really are more UFOs in the skies

than usual. “I’ve heard anecdotal accounts that UFO sightings have risen during the coronavirus pandemic and the associated lockdowns, but have yet to see any definitive data on this,” says Nick Pope, who investigated UFOs for the U.K. Ministry of Defense but currently lives in the U.S. “Not only is there not an international database that [collects this information], there isn’t even a national one [in the United States].” In the U.S., someone wishing to report a UFO sighting might contact one of several scrappy, splintered nonprofit organizations — like MUFON, or NUFORC, or CUFOS — whose mostly volunteer members study alleged UFO sightings. Or, they might just call the local news. If the Pentagon has a centralized database that collects and verifies these sightings, they haven’t told me, which is expected, if not very nice. Caveats aside: It really does *feel* like UFO sightings are up in the United States, too.

Pope, for the record, expected the opposite. “My initial view was that lockdowns would lead to fewer sightings, as people were cooped up indoors, and thus, less likely to notice anything unusual in the sky,” he says. “Also, given that many sightings turn out to be misidentifications of aircraft and aircraft lights, the downturn in flying activity should have resulted in fewer sightings.” This latter point is one I hadn’t considered, and, depending on your personal willingness to believe, may lend credibility to those sightings that are reported while commercial air travel remains low.

“In the normal course of business, a bigger percentage of UFO sightings than people might suppose do just turn out to be well-intentioned people misidentifying aircraft,” says Pope. “A large number of those potential sightings, they’ve been taken off the table. So I think that which remains is less likely to be mundane.”

Other features of lockdown might be considered conducive to UFO sightings as well. For one, spending so much time at home might give more of us reason to familiarize ourselves with patterns in our own patches of sky. Statistical work by Cheryl Costa, a former military technician and aerospace analyst, and her wife, Linda, has shown that people who report UFO sightings are most often smokers and/or people with dogs. “These are people who are outside a lot, at the same times of day or night,” explains Sarah Scoles, the author of *They Are Already Here: UFO Culture and Why We See Saucers*. “They know what the sky looks like, and know when something is anomalous.” It may be the case that there are exactly as many UFOs flying overhead as always, and all that’s changed is the degree to which we’re paying attention.

Worth noting here, of course, is that “UFO” doesn’t (unfortunately) necessarily mean alien spacecraft. “Maybe there are more military flights than there used to be, or more people playing around with their drones than there used to be,” says Scoles. The current political climate certainly lends itself to a fear of spy planes or other militaristic threat; this wouldn’t be the first time that international conflict is correlated with a cultural fascination with UFOs.

“UFO belief and interest tends to ebb and flow with the cultural and existential tide of dread, so when bad things are going on, people do tend to turn to the skies more often in search of something powerful, something distracting, or even a different kind of threat,” says Scoles. It’s not that we’d somehow know any better how to deal with alien invasion than we do the coronavirus, but perhaps science-fiction movies have made us *think* we do. Maybe we’re hoping someone will save us, or at least introduce a more theatrical villain.

Pope is wary of drawing any direct link between the pandemic and the alleged uptick in sightings, but agrees that people are hungry for distraction. “Why is the Department of Defense publishing videos of Navy jets chasing UFOs in the middle of a pandemic? Is it because it’s a good day to bury bad news?” he says. “Whatever the reason, I think it did provide a bit of relief. Anything but coronavirus, please. Give us something else.”