

Sky and Telescope
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Spacecraft Activity as "UFOs"
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For thousands of excited eyewitnesses in central China and Taiwan, the celestial apparition of last August 27 was a thrilling novelty, a burst of hitherto unexperienced excitement over a "UFO visit". But for me, their evening encounter with the UFO was genuine *deja vu* -- I'd heard it all before, and it was easy to figure out what it had been.

The descriptions were almost 'classic' for this phenomenon. The glowing object was "like an oval plate", or "like a comet", with a tail "like an umbrella". It was orangish in color, and spun clockwise as it flew eastward. Witnesses reported spotting it between about 7:30 and 8:30 P.M. local time. News services around the world picked up the UFO story and briefly splashed it across radio, television, and newspapers.

What the witnesses were seeing was a spaceship, all right, but not an extraterrestrial one. It quickly transpired that the latest Japanese H-1 booster launching was responsible, as the spent second stage tumbled across China at the end of its second orbit. Excess propellant was venting out of the slowly tumbling rocket body, and this cloud caught the rays of the twilight sun a hundred miles above the already-dark land.

The Chinese experience, in fact, was a near repeat of the "Great East Coast UFO" of August 12, 1986, when hundreds of thousands of people in eastern North America were treated to a spectacular sky show while waiting for Perseid meteors. The same type of booster had just been launched on its maiden flight and as it passed up the U.S. East Coast about 10 PM EDT its dumped fuel formed a spiral cloud. Descriptions were practically identical to those which came in from China after the H-1's second flight.

Such space booster fuel dumps have been occurring for decades, but in recent years have become more frequent as a safety measure since undumped fuel can cause a booster to later explode and litter its orbit with space junk. And as these sky shows occur in the skies over every continent, millions of people see them -- and become UFO believers! Somehow the prosaic explanations for these events never seems to catch up, and the original reporting of each new sighting never seems to calmly point out that such apparitions are regularly caused by ordinary terrestrial spaceflight activity.

Typical reports can help underscore just how widespread -- and misunderstood -- this kind of celestial phenomenon is, and how useful the sightings can actually be in evaluating the accuracy of other eyewitness accounts of spectacular lights in the sky.

On March 18, 1987, the pre-midnight passage of a "UFO" over Alaska was widely seen because residents of western parts of the state were outside to cheer on the Iditarod dogsled racers. The "UFO" was like "an aircraft landing lights as seen through a fog", a witness reported; another person saw a "bright aqua-blue-green colored oval-shaped object approximately the size of two

football fields with three lights on the side and an egg-shaped cloud around and leaving a smoke trail behind." Many people made stabs at estimating size (by guessing at range): it was "round and bigger than a jet-liner," one said; to another, the object "seemed to be bigger than a 747 jet at that altitude." Another witness claimed: "There seemed to be a bright cloud of smoke thrusting downward with one red and one white light." But what they were all seeing was a fuel dump from the last stage of the USSR's Kosmos-1833, launched from central Asia shortly before.

Satellite launchings from the Plesetsk cosmodrome in NW Russia set off a series of Soviet UFO panics in 1977-1981 when some rare twilight blast-offs created apparitions seen from Estonia to Leningrad to Moscow and points east. An avalanche of public anxiety over repeated "UFO attacks" (the biggest were on September 20, 1977, June 14, 1980, and May 15, 1981) led to numerous articles in the popular press where officials tried to explain away the sightings as "chemoluminescent industrial smog" (sort of "swampsky gas"). The ironic dilemma was that government officials were unable to provide the authentic explanations ("Kosmos" and "Meteor" satellite launchings) since the existence of the Plesetsk base was a military secret. Finally, in mid-1983, under pressure from worldwide articles mocking the impossible coverup, Soviet newspapers admitted the existence of the rocket center.

More than twenty years ago, another Soviet space project ignited UFO panic across the Ukraine, the Caucasus, and the Volga Valley. Test space-to-earth nuclear warheads were launched from central Asia, circled the Earth once, then plunged back into the atmosphere toward an impact point near Volgograd. These flights tended to occur in the early evening and they were widely witnessed as giant "crescent-shaped UFOs" (one pilot even reported the UFO circled his aircraft, making its engine stall). Their accounts were widely published and even were quoted in hearings at the US Congress and the British House of Lords. In response, Dr. Nikolay Kardeshev of the USSR Academy of Sciences sent a team under the direction of astronomer Lev Gindilis. Their official report concluded (in the absence of their ability to reveal the true nature of the orbital weapons tests) that the reports represented a genuinely unexplained anomaly, possibly representing some extraterrestrial phenomenon. That's the official Soviet position to this day!

A particular accident of geography allows the Soviets to export their UFO panics to South America. Some rockets launched from Plesetsk perform a second burn half an orbit later, over the far southeast Pacific, and then drift across South America spewing excess fuel. When this occurs at twilight, millions of people in Chile, Argentina, Uruguay and Brazil can see a glowing globe of gas. Visual descriptions are fantastic enough, but other eyewitnesses have reported being blinded, chased, or contacted telepathically. The tenuous pseudo-UFO has reportedly caused radar blips and power failures. One Brazilian witness in 1978 even fainted and experienced a sexual encounter with the craft's occupants -- a story confirmed under hypnosis by other UFO enthusiasts!

Outside of the satisfaction of solving UFO cases involving literally hundreds of thousands of eyewitnesses, what has my research taught me about the UFO phenomenon? These unique space events have provided what for all intents and purposes has been a series of "control experiments" in which known visual stimuli are presented to naive test subjects. The validity of verbal accounts of "ordinary UFO" encounters can then be calibrated.

The decades-old "UFO phenomenon" does not measure up well to this analysis, and this is

consistent with the intuition of experienced sky watchers. Percipients often gave grossly inaccurate accounts of time, size, and location in the sky. Expectable coincidences such as "aircraft interactions" became enshrined as cause-and-effect evidence of an extraordinary phenomenon. Governments in general showed little interest in providing authentic explanations (they often seemed to prefer the public believe in UFO's rather than understand the activities which were true causes of the sightings). The reaction of the news media was mixed, with explanations frequently being published ex post facto, usually buried deeply inside back sections of newspapers. Sadly, perceptual psychologists and other scientists with genuine interest in related fields tended to instinctively ignore the usable reports since they were considered contaminated with "UFOria". Meanwhile, the space events continue, and those of us who have properly identified them experience frustration and envy to have personally missed such beautiful and baffling visions.

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