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Remember when you were a little kid and the closet door was open at night in your bedroom and the pants, stockings and shirts became snakes, alligators and tigers?

Well, now that you're all grown up, your brain is playing those same kinds of tricks when you see strange objects in the sky.

Venus a UFO?

The planet Venus, for example, turns out to be the unidentified flying object reported most often, says Frank Salisbury, a plant physiologist at Utah State University and the author of several books on UFOs.

When the brain perceives a

planets. The matter needed to fuel those spaceships, Mr. Jarvis says, would equal about 500,000 suns the size of our own.

Mr. Jarvis also makes a more straightforward point: If extraterrestrial beings piloting the impossibly large number of UFOs reported each year want to talk with Earthlings so badly, why don't they just land on the White House lawn and get on with it?

That doesn't mean there isn't a lot of natural phenomena for which there is no explanation. But those UFO's will be unidentified for only so long. When they are identified, Mr. Jarvis says, odds are they won't be Saturnian Cadillacs.

Experts Discount Theories

To Most GrownUps, UFOs Are Usually Mysterious Bogeymen of the Skies

heavenly object that doesn't conform to what it already knows, it makes a logical leap, he says. "The brain is constantly trying to fill in the gaps. We are so determined to explain what we see that we fill in the gaps. What we get is a misrepresentation of the facts by the brain."

That's what happened to a lot of people on Feb. 23, when a UFO streaked over the western United States. Only it wasn't a UFO. The object turned out to be a Soviet booster rocket that was launched Feb. 16 and fell into decaying orbit.

When they see a UFO, many people are eager to conclude that the

object is a spaceship out for a Sunday drive or bent on Earth's destruction. Hansen Planetarium staffer Seth Jarvis pooh-poohs such fantasizing, offering mathematical computations to support his claim that such beings would be unlikely to visit Earth.

Astronomers' estimates of the

number of planets in the universe that could support life as we know it range from an optimistic million to a pessimistic 100, he says.

Huge Need for Fuel

Any extraterrestrial society capable of exploring the stars would need to launch 10,000 spaceships each year to explore all possible