

UFO . . . or Mars?

Pulsating red light tails travelers

Staff and wire reports

To a carload of people, the pulsating red light trailing them Thursday over western Arizona most certainly was real. The UFO Reporting Center in Seattle agrees.

But in Tucson, Carl Posey of Kitt Peak Observatory said the object almost certainly was the planet Mars — nearly 34 million miles from earth.

Astronomical data indicate Mars hasn't been so visible to the unaided eye for 15 years, Posey said.

He also said its appearance would match the motorists' description, and it would set like a sun, slipping below the horizon about 4:30 a.m.

Robert Gribble, a volunteer researcher at the privately financed UFO center, where the report was referred, said Mars is only one possibility.

"It's very hard to get an identification on just a light, but if it's a moving, maneuvering object, then of course that would eliminate any kind of astronomical body."

A woman, her two teenage sons and another adult were traveling along U.S. 93 near Wikieup, a town of 500 people 120 miles northwest of Phoenix, when they spotted the bright light, Sgt. Allan Schmidt, a Department of Public Safety spokesman, said.

The DPS officer sent to investigate also saw the mysterious light before it dived from view.

"It appeared to be sitting on a mountain ridge about five miles away," Schmidt said. "It then appeared to move and follow them along to the west as they traveled, coming within about a mile of them at one point."

Schmidt described the object as "about twice as bright and twice as big as a star."

"There were no alien beings, no ziggy rays or anything like that," he said.

The people who said their car was followed by the light called the DPS from a pay phone at Wikieup, and DPS Officer Veronica Minch was dispatched to investigate about 4 a.m., Schmidt said.

Though Schmidt declined to identify the people, he said, "they were agitated, excited, but not crazy people — not hallucinating, drunk or crazy."

He said when Minch arrived, the light was hovering just above the horizon.

"While she was there, it suddenly dropped out of sight below the horizon," he said, "but she discounted that due to tired eyes."

Officials at Nellis Air Force Base near Las Vegas, Nev., were contacted "to see if they had done any rocket work" that might have accounted for the light, but they said they had not, Schmidt said.

Gribble said he is trying to contact the people who reported the light.

"If the witnesses cannot describe a structured, wingless vehicle of any kind, and if it is just a light, we would classify it as unknown and probably never come up with an answer," he said.

Gribble, 60, said about 10 percent of the sightings are never explained and may represent "highly advanced civilizations and life from the solar system."

He said the center receives about six UFO sightings a day from all over the North American continent.

"We get very few reports out of Arizona, but that doesn't mean people aren't seeing things," Gribble said.

A spokesman for the North American Air Defense Command said officials were studying reports of the Arizona sighting.

Delbert Kindschi said NORAD often receives inquiries about objects that turn out to be satellites burning out as they re-enter the Earth's atmosphere.

However, Kindschi said the Arizona sighting did not seem to match the descriptions of incidents involving satellites.

A spokesman for the National Weather Service in Phoenix said the object sighted near Wikieup probably was not a weather balloon. He said balloons in Arizona are launched only from Winslow and Tucson.