

Among other more unusual sightings in Virginia:

■ In 1964, an "occupant" encounter was reported near Staunton by several people who saw an alien alight from a spaceship. According to Fawcett, who keeps extensive files on sightings, the creature "looked pretty much like they all do."

■ In 1965, a "rash of sightings" was reported by Norfolk residents.

■ Two years later, according to author/UFO expert Larry Bryant of Alexandria, a Chesapeake man, who has never been located since, was abducted by aliens.

■ In South Hill in the same year, residents reported "a disc" landed, scorching the road and setting a field on fire. "All the livestock and animals on the farm," says Fawcett, "were so terrified they couldn't make a sound."

■ In 1973, a Richmond motorist reported "a confrontation" with a UFO.

Calls on sightings

While UFO watchers say it's been relatively quiet in Virginia the last few years, it doesn't mean that the UFO radar screen hasn't had its share of hits.

Robert Hitt, director of the Chesapeake planetarium, receives calls several times a year from people who have seen unusual objects in the sky.

"One person not long ago insisted she saw a craft land and someone got out and drove away in a van," says Hitt. "Another told me that there was a UFO that landed on a regular schedule. Most of them are about strange activity in the sky and they come from very well meaning, sincere people. I don't doubt what they say they have seen."

What Hitt, many other scientists and the U.S. Air Force doubt is the interpretation of what's been seen. According to the Air Force, from 1948 through 1983, it investigated some 12,818 sightings of UFOs and was able to explain all but 701.

"Many things that appear to be truly mystifying often have an explanation that is very remarkable but perfectly natural," says Hitt. "I remember one case several years ago in Australia where bright lights were seen on the horizon. It turned out to be the lights on a fishing fleet several thousand miles away. The lights were being reflected off the atmospheric layers.

"And sometimes it can be much simpler than that. One time I was in the Greenbrier section of Chesapeake and I saw a circle of lights moving round and round and approaching me. There wasn't any noise I could detect. They kept spinning. I started breathing a little bit faster thinking 'This could really be something.'"

It was.

A Piper Cub plane that had an advertising sign trimmed with strobe lights under its wings.

"People who argue the existence of UFOs point to the mathematical probability that life exists other than on our planet," Hitt says. "So it's highly likely there are UFOs. 'But by the same token, those mathematics also point to the unlikelihood that we've been visited by so many space ships.'"

Evidence available

And, of course, say the skeptics, there is still no hard evidence. For that, say UFOlogists such as Virginia aviation writer Don Berliner, ask the Air Force. Berliner, Bryant and others contend the Air Force has both remnants and bodies from UFO crashes stashed at Hampton's Langley Air Force Base and other bases around the country.

"For one," says Berliner, "there was a crash in New Mexico in 1947 that the government has every scrap from. And there have been others. . . Why are they holding such information? I don't know. Maybe they know too much or maybe

they don't have any idea what it all means and are still trying to unravel it."

MUNFO and groups such as Bryant's Citizens Against UFO Secrecy have tried, to no avail, to bring suit against the Air Force, demanding that the government surrender any and all extraterrestrials it has found in crash landings over the years.

UFOlogists are hopeful that the Great Flap of '66-'67 will help to bring enough pressure on the government to "reveal what they know."

However, George Eberhart, librarian for the Center for UFO Studies in Glenview, Ill., and author of the two-volume "UFOs and Extra Terrestrial Contact Movement" (Scarecrow Press, \$97.50), just smiles when he hears skeptics maintain that without evidence, UFOlogists have no case.

"Yes, they have their points," says Eberhart. "But the problem is that 20th century scientists often forget there is going to be a 21st century science and a 22nd century science where standards will be different. Try to think of just on this planet, of 200 years ago trying to accept the idea of air travel from continent to continent. That required an enormous leap of reasoning.

"Not long ago, the idea we could go to the moon required a quantum leap in our thinking. So the idea of going to the stars for us is a 10-quantum leap. No question of that. But maybe we're going to have to make that leap in our thinking. How else are we going to explain these things?"

The International Symposium on UFOs, celebrating the 40th anniversary of the "modern age" of UFO sightings, will be held June 26-28 at American University in Washington D.C. Those interested in attending should write to Fund for UFO Research, P.O. Box 277, Mount Rainier, Md. 20712.