

UFO 'flap' still unexplained

By Mark Holmberg
Times-Dispatch staff writer

"Go, UFOs!" bellowed an excited young woman.

The orange orb bounced up and down briskly before arcing high through the air and slicing through the net of the Wytheville Community Center basketball court.

Two points.

It was too little too late for the Wytheville UFOs, who were trounced at the hands of the Community Hospital team during the senior's league game.

"We invaded earth a long time ago, but we still haven't learned the game of basketball yet," said R.C. Scott, sweating on the sidelines after the game. "Gravity's different down here."

Team members joked that the team name stands for "Unidentified Fat Objects," but they admitted that they, like the rest of the Wythe County community, were fascinated by the more than 2,000 UFOs that were spotted in the crisp skies back in the fall.

"We saw it back in September, two weeks before everybody else started seeing it," said team member Johnny Turner, nodding to his son Chris. "There was a row of red lights and a row of green lights, shaped kind of like the back of a car — it was flying as low as a tall tree. We just passed it off."

Chris, a National Junior Honor Society member, said they've been wondering what it was "After seeing that, it's hard to keep from looking up now."

The sightings began in earnest in October.

No one was immune: hunters, secretaries, housewives, even a police chief and a state police dispatcher admitted seeing objects that were described as "a flying school bus" (one of the more popular descriptions), "something bouncing on a string," "a large sphere with red spheres on each side," "an upside-down ice cream cone" and "a humongous mother ship."

The strange craft silently hovered or drifted just over the treetops of some of the most beautiful countryside anywhere: Piney, Speedwell, Cripple Creek, Big Walker Mountain, Elk Creek, Rural Retreat.

Were the vehicles secret military aircraft or aliens from outer space? That was the big question. Very few believed that so many of their solid, good-hearted neighbors could be going crazy.

"Our people are not daffy. They're seeing something," said Dr. Carl E. Stark, mayor of Wytheville, roughly the geographic center of most of the sightings. "I'm very proud of our community; they're approaching this thing very sensibly. But they're concerned. If there are secret things going on, they deserve to know about it."

Although he said his wife has seen the objects, he's not ready to push the panic button: "Nobody has been zapped, there's been no damage and nobody's gotten hysterical."

Besides, added Stark, town mayor for 26 years, "It helps the restaurant and hotel business. We're glad to welcome all those interested in UFOs."

The UFOs have been a boon for Dick Phillipi, co-owner of the Texaco Travel Store and the Comfort Inn on Interstate 81 in Wytheville.

"We put up a sign: 'UFOs, Come On Down!'" said Phillipi, laughing. But he's had no response to his advertised offer of "Free flap-ups for any UFO craft and free rooms at the motel for aliens."

In the local paper, one of his ads read: "One of the reasons you can't hear those UFOs is they're running on Texaco gas."

Phillipi also had T-shirts and caps made with a UFO emblazoned on them, along with the words: "Wythe County — The UFO Capital of Virginia." He's sold about 800 shirts.

Phillipi reported that some people driving vehicles bearing the NASA logo stayed at his hotel for "four or five days. They were also seen in town. Who knows what's going on out there?"

Anyone driving through the cozy town nestled in the early slopes of the Appalachian mountains would see at least one "unidentified flying object." That would be the large green one perched atop the marquee of the Millwald Theater in the heart of Wytheville, right down the hill from the giant pencil that leans out over the street in front of an office supply store.

George Jordan, who works for the theater, made the craft out of styrofoam for a special showing of "Was-Of The Worlds," screened in honor of the sightings.

"Boy, we really had a big weekend with that — we're not going to take it down."

Jordan, like most of the people interviewed in Wythe County, proved to be warm and friendly, willing to spend a few moments visiting with a stranger. As soon as UFOs were mentioned, his face, like those of his neighbors, brightened with an indulgent smile.

But not James E. Moore's face. "All this UFO stuff is a buncha damn lollygag," growled the man known around Wytheville as Coal-dust. A well-known local character, he wanders around town searching for aluminum cans and wire.

"They been up to the moon — they claim. They'd a seen something. Ain't nothing out in space but rocks — something's a-wrong with their brain."

Famous locally for his songs about a Nashville bus and the local jail, Coal-dust said his greatest desire is to sing and play on "I-See-It-Aw." Currently, he's working on a song about UFOs.

"If you get something started in this town, it'll get spread all over, and they'll make a bunch a damn gossip out of it," Coal-dust said, warming to the topic. "They're just trying to fool people. It's a buncha damn hootenanny."

Danny Gordon, news and sports director for WYVE-AM, thinks the UFO sightings are anything but "hootenanny."

Through hustle and determination, Gordon became the central figure in the Wythe "flap" (as a rash of UFO sightings is called), encouraging his listeners to come forward, taking calls, correlating information and re-playing what he felt were the most reliable sightings on the air.

"I refuse to stop until it [UFOs] stops or we find out what it is," Gordon said. As of last week, the calls — while down to a trickle — were still coming in.

Gordon, like many in the community, wasn't relieved by the wire service story announcing that the alleged UFOs might actually be Tennessee Air National Guard refueling operations, which had been stepped up in the area during the sightings. The area is frequently used for such operations and other military maneuvers, said Gordon, and those living in the area are used to them.

"We don't have the technology to do what these craft have done," said Gordon. He said the craft have been seen hovering at altitudes of 300 feet; several times the skyline of the mountains was seen above the craft.

"That's much lower than the ceiling for the refueling operations," said Gordon, who has seen the UFOs on a number of occasions. He added, "I kind of scoffed at it until I saw it. Once you see it, it changes your perception. It blows your mind to watch it."



UNBELIEVER — "They been up to the moon they claim. They'd-a seen something. Ain't nothing out in space but rocks ...," says James E. "Coal-dust" Moore.



Photos by Randy Lilly

BELIEVER — Radio newsman Danny Gordon is convinced of UFO's validity. "Once you've seen it, it changes your perception."

He described the UFO as "a big craft with a lot of smaller craft attached to it. People are seeing it from different angles — that's why we're getting different descriptions."

He said he's called the Pentagon, NORAD, Langley Air Force Base, any place that could be sending aircraft over the area. "I want to be able to tell my listeners what it is."