

Mystery blow-ins of Gulf Breeze

WALTER Andrus, who spends his time co-ordinating UFO sightings, is collating information on the case of a Florida man who claims to have chased aliens across his backyard.

Andrus (67) is international director of the Mutual UFO Network (MUFON). His task is to determine if the encounters are legitimate, or just another hoax. So far, he says, nothing in the Florida case has pointed to a hoax.

"This is one of the most amazing cases I've ever seen", said Andrus, who works out of an office next to his home in Seguin, Texas.

The Florida man, known as Mr Ed (only the editor of a local paper knows his full name), says he has pursued small alien creatures across his backyard in Gulf Breeze several times since November. Despite bilingual telephatic warnings (English and Spanish) that "photographs are prohibited", he says he took a number of pictures and even a videotape.

The excitement has taken MUFON investigators to Gulf Breeze for storkouts with walkie talkies and cameras. So far, they have turned up nothing.

On the other hand, they've not been able to disprove what they consider convincing evidence.

Mr Ed says he has seen a circular UFO with portholes and a large light on its underside. His most striking picture, according to Andrus, is of one flying across a country road.

A secretary at Gulf Breeze city hall said other people in the small town had now reported their own otherworldly encounters.

Enthusiasm

None of the local police, however, has seen any flying saucers, "or if they have, they haven't told me about it", police Captain Ken Hicks said.

Andrus's enthusiasm for the case is clear, but he stops short of declaring it a positive sighting.

It is not that he has any doubt about the existence of UFOs.

It is that MUFON, which with 1,500 members claims to be the largest group of people studying unidentified flying objects in the world, prides itself on its professionalism and thoroughness.

Encounter

Having uncovered more than a few hoaxes, the group has learned that just because somebody says they have seen a UFO doesn't mean it's so.

"We want facts", Andrus said. Too many UFO sightings have been produced by fertile imaginations using fancy model spaceships, he believes.

MUFON, give a lengthy test to its investigators, based on a 161-page handbook written by MUFON officials, who include lawyers, aerospace engineers and former Air Force officers.

It includes sections on astronomy, radio propagation, electronics and other fields. Those who fail cannot be MUFON investigators.

When an investigator arrives at the scene of a sighting, he comes equipped with more than an interest in UFOs. Witnesses are asked to fill out 15 lengthy forms with such categories as

"landing/traces/artifacts", "animal effects", "entity cases", and "residual radiation".

"We're not just playing with a hobby here. Someone has to take it seriously", said Andrus.

One reason Andrus regards UFOs so earnestly is that he believes he has had his own encounter with visitors from another world.

Convention

On August 15, 1968, during a holiday stop in Phoenix, he, his wife and their five-year-old son saw four dull grey discs hovering in the sky.

The discs vanished after 20 minutes, but the experience profoundly affected Andrus. "I was just intrigued", he says. He has pursued UFOs ever since because he considers them "the most important scientific item going today".

In 1968, Andrus and other UFO enthusiasts formed the Midwest UFO Network. The name was changed as the group grew and the headquarters moved with Andrus when his work transferred to Seguin.

He retired from his job as a plant production manager in 1983 and has since devoted all his time to MUFON. His wife, Jeanne, does not share his passion but son Donald, now a lawyer, does some of MUFON's legal work.

Every year, the organisation holds an international convention to discuss the latest in UFO news.

Basically, he said, MUFON would like to answer four questions:

First, do UFOs exist? In his mind, with 60,000 reported sightings, there's no doubt. "What we don't know is what they are for sure. We know they're not made on the planet Earth; that's for sure", Andrus says.

Second, how are they powered? "Engineers at some aerospace firms would like to know how they can hover, manoeuvre and fly at such tremendous speeds", Andrus says.

Third, where are they from? From another planet? Another universe? The possibilities are endless, making this the "most exciting" question to Andrus.

Finally, what can humans learn? "Apparently", Andrus said, "they are much more advanced in science and technology. We want to study them. So far, they're just studying us".