

UFO hunters searching up a storm

Hudson Valley spot in New York attracts regular watchers like a magnet

PINE BUSH, N.Y. (AP) — Clouds quickly fill the night sky, obscuring a nearly full moon. It's not a good night to find Whatever's Out There.

Still, a half-dozen people who have parked their cars on the shoulder of a country road in New York's Hudson Valley crane their necks to scan the sky. This is supposedly a prime area for spotting UFO activity, but the only things visible on this cool autumn evening are airplanes banking into nearby airports.

Peter Gersten waits suspiciously. The silver-bearded lawyer believes 99 percent of supposed UFO sightings are easily explainable, despite the vanity license plates on his Porsche that read UFOSREAL. He has devoted hundreds of hours to wresting UFO documents

from the government in court.

Most UFO watchers are more patient than the federal government. The U.S. Air Force canceled its surveillance program, Project Bluebook, on Dec. 17, 1969, almost five months after the Apollo 11 astronauts landed on the moon. Dr. Edward U. Condon of the University of Colorado recommended that the program end after years of unconvincing research. But UFO searchers persist. Victoria Lacas waits expectantly. She is angry because most people abducted by aliens are unwilling victims and she would be more than happy to submit herself to experiments.

Linda Doern waits calmly. Linda and her husband, Peter, both real estate appraisers, admit to being fascinated by

psychic and other unexplained phenomena. An evening in Pine Bush, she jokes, "beats watching television."

Ellen Crystall waits excitedly. The self-described UFO photographer is the guardian of the field, where she claims to have seen aliens and dozens of unexplained lights. She has driven to this field from her New Jersey home hundreds of times since 1981 in the hope of making contact again.

Whatever the reason, strange sightings seem commonplace in the Hudson Valley. Hundreds of people — not just those who go out looking for them — have seen things in the sky that can't be explained, says Philip Imbrogno, author of "Night Siege: The Hudson Valley UFO Sightings."

These sightings caused a sensation in 1983 and 1984. Reports have been less frequent since then, but still steady, Imbrogno says.

Most, if not all, can be easily explained, says Jeff Lehman of nearby Stewart International Airport. He says a group of pilots, whose identity is not known, enjoy fooling UFO fanatics by flying in close formation many evenings. It is not illegal, but it is annoying, he says.

Crystall believes. She says she saw something unusual at the cornfield off Searsville Road, 20 miles from Middletown, soon after she was first taken there by a magazine writer.

Gazing over a distant treeline while alone at the field one night, she spotted what appeared to be a craft drifting slowly to the ground. After seeing something flutter, almost like a moth, she shined a spotlight into a wooded area. She says she saw a 3½-foot creature with a beige body and huge yellow eyes staring back at her.

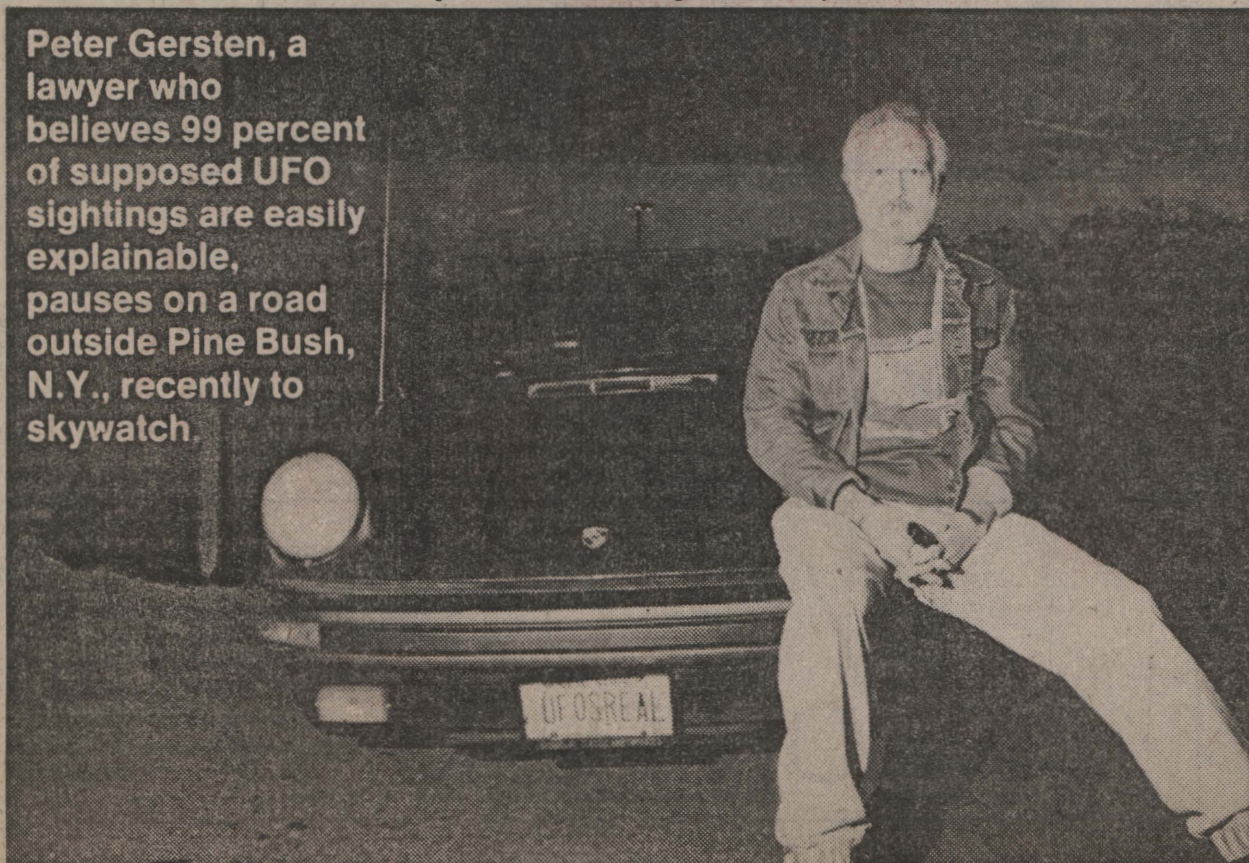
The blond music student claims to have taken 800 photographs of UFOs. She says she holds no grudges against people who don't share her beliefs but confides, "I try to avoid them."

Gersten, who has set up a hot line for UFO fanatics to keep up on the gossip, says he enjoys the mystery and glamour of UFOs.

For the Doerns, all aspects of the paranormal are fascinating. There's a lot more going on in the world than meets the naked eye, Linda says, but she understands why most people look at UFOs and psychic phenomena with abundant skepticism.

After the drive to Searsville Road, some participants note the "eerie strangeness" they feel while gazing at the sky. But when it's apparent most of the lights in the sky are either stars or airplanes, conversations drift to baseball and photography.

Peter Gersten, a lawyer who believes 99 percent of supposed UFO sightings are easily explainable, pauses on a road outside Pine Bush, N.Y., recently to skywatch.



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