

# UFO group checks sightings

## Residents turn to MUFON in effort to explain incidents

By Kathy Kemp

Post-Herald Reporter

Whom do you call to report a UFO?

The police, maybe?

That's good. But then whom do the police

call?

Uh, the FBI?

The Air Force?

NASA?

That's favorite newspaper reporter?

The fact is, you can call all of the above, but the only organization (besides the news media) that's likely to show much interest is a non-profit, mostly volunteer civilian agency based in South Texas called MUFON, short for Mutual UFO Network.

"They're a life-saver," says U.S. Army Maj. Alex Mondragon, a spokesman for the North American Aerospace Defense Command in Colorado Springs, Colo.

"A lot of the staff people think is a UFO is actually returning space junk. Sometimes it's meteor activity. And there are things we can't explain. But as long as they pose no threat to national security, the government's not going to get involved."

But MUFON always does.

Just days after residents in Pyrite first reported seeing peculiar-shaped objects hovering soundlessly in the sky, an Alabama-based MUFON volunteer traveled to the Sand Mountain community to interview the witnesses.

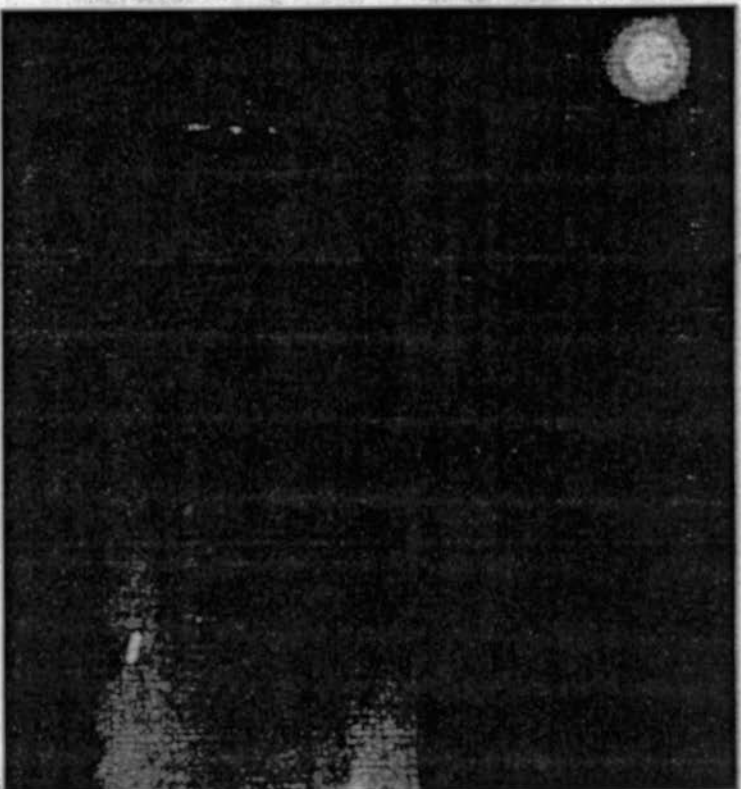
"People have these experiences, and a lot of them say, 'My god, when it happens, you don't know who to call,'" says MUFON spokesman Duncan Crow, a lawyer in Montgomery.

"You can't call the police, because there's not really anything they can do about it. They can come out there and make you feel safer, I suppose, and they can write a little report, they'll file, but beyond that, there's not anything anybody can do."

MUFON, like a similar organization called the Center for UFO Studies, is made up of people from all walks of life who are interested in the UFO phenomenon and willing to help gather data on UFO incidents that happen near their communities.

In the case of the Pyrite sightings, which began Feb. 18 and still are being reported, calling the police wasn't necessary. The witnesses were the police.

Pyrite Police Chief Junior Garmany and Assistant Chief Fred Works told a MUFON investigator the same thing they told reporters: that about 4:30 p.m. on Feb. 18, while responding to a call from a Sand Mountain homemaker who reported seeing a peculiar flying object, they spotted a brightly lit craft hovering above a dark country road.



A UFO hovers above tree line in the lower right of this photograph taken by Teri Baker, co-owner of the Weekly Post, a

The police, along with the DeKalb County sheriff's office, tried to find a logical answer to the mystery.

But the National Aeronautics and Space Administration's Marshall Space Flight Center in Huntsville, about 48 miles to the northwest, offered no explanation. Neither did officials at area airports, and no one from the military has come forward to explain it, either.

In the four weeks since the first sightings, the folks in Pyrite — and curious tourists who've journeyed there — have been seeing all kinds of weird things in the sky.

Teri Baker, a co-owner of Huntsville's Weekly Post newspaper, snapped a photograph Thursday night that shows a bright cylindrical object just above the tree line.

The photograph, like most of the sightings, falls into the category of what MUFON calls a distant night sighting, or a "nocturnal light." Nocturnal lights, MUFON investigators acknowledge, "turn out to be airbrakes, or stars, or — in some cases — manifestations of

newspaper in Rainsville. The moon is in the upper left. The picture was taken Thursday night near Pyrite.

the witness' imaginations.

"A UFO, most people equate that with flying saucers," Crow says.

"We're talking about unidentified flying objects. — Most, about 90 percent, are explainable."

But some of the sightings in Pyrite, including those of the police officers and the Sand Mountain homemaker who alerted them, can probably be classified as the more mysterious "close encounters," says Jeff Ballard, the MUFON investigator who did the Pyrite interviews.

The homemaker, Donna Saylor, reported seeing a large and extremely bright object hovering above a neighbor's yard the night of Feb. 18.

When Garmany and Works went to investigate, they spotted a silent, brightly lit object that they said was as large as a jetliner. As the object flew over them, the officers said, they saw that it was trapezoidal-shaped, with a white light on the bottom that pointed up

speculation among Pyrite residents has run the gamut. Mr. Saylor's thoughts seem to sum things up for the whole town: "I have two conclusions," she says. "First, it's a UFO from outer space. The other is, it's something the government is testing, and they do it in these little out-of-the-way places where they think nobody but Hicks live."

Could the Pyrite incident have been a government test? "I don't know if we would be told that even if it were true," says Ballard, a Huntsville engineer who has worked with MUFON for more than a year. "I don't want to engage in talks of cover-up or anything, because I really don't think that's going on."

"As far as it being extraterrestrial, I have no idea. So far, in talking with the people, they didn't see any aliens or anything like that. It was just something in the sky they couldn't explain." MUFON as an organization believes in the concept of aliens from another planet, though not all MUFON volunteers subscribe to that theory.

Both Ballard and Crow say the stereotypical view that someone who sees a UFO is backward or illiterate is not accurate. "When I first read these stories (about the Pyrite sightings), I had the initial perception that Donna (Mrs. Saylor) was some kind of backwards person," Ballard says. "She's actually a very literate person with a high school education. — The people we talk to have been quite sincere. They're literate people who've seen something very unusual."

By and large, people who experience close encounters — from those who report close observations of peculiar flying objects to those who claim they were abducted by extraterrestrials — cross all cultural, social and racial boundaries, Crow says. "People have these experiences, whatever their nature, daily," he says.

"For every report, there are probably nine or 10 other incidents like that in a given area that never come to the surface anywhere because people are afraid to talk about it."