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Weird tales, sightings liven up Soviet press

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Headless aliens from space invade Russia!

"Huge hairy creature" terrifies villagers in the Volga valley!

Possible UFO lands in Moscow!

Although President Mikhail Gorbachev's reforms haven't spawned U.S.-style supermarket tabloids — let alone U.S.-style supermarkets — *glasnost* has changed the Soviet media, as evidenced by these recent stories, and a lot of people seem to love it.

The change is evident on state-run television, once a showcase for morally uplifting and dull Boy-Loves-Tractor movies about building communism and news reports lauding factories overfulfilling the Five-Year Plan.

Now, six days a week, as part of the breakfast TV program 120 Minutes, grey-haired mystic Alan Chumak waves his hands on camera to cure viewers from Minsk to Vladivostok of what ails them.

The inability to watch the program is not a problem. Leave the set on, and a jar of water, juice or massage cream placed by the TV screen supposedly will be "charged" by Mr. Chumak's gestures and can be used later for treatment.

Since the days of the wild-eyed

monk Kaspuun, hypnotist and confidant at the court of the last czar, Russians have been intrigued by the occult and fantastic, and stories about UFOs, vanished planets and ESP have always had an eager audience.

With *glasnost*, or greater openness, such topics are getting more exposure than ever in the once-stuffy official Soviet media, and this despite the firmly materialistic and rationalist ideology of the ruling Communist Party.

The Socialist Industry daily newspaper, an organ of the party's Central Committee, has a mandate to report on the Soviet economy but often makes space for news items that have nothing to do with either socialism or industry.

On Tuesday, there was this intriguing account of invaders from space landing in Central Russia's Perm region: dairy worker Lyubov Medvedev told the newspaper, "At about 4:30 in the morning, I was going to the farm when I saw a dark figure seemingly riding a motorcycle . . . But when I looked closely at the figure, I noticed there was no motorcycle, but just something resembling a man, but taller than average with short legs."

The creature had "only a small knob instead of a head," Ms Medvedev said. "I was frightened to death . . . then it became fluorescent and disappeared." Beekeeper G. Sharoglazov saw two egg-shaped "fluorescent objects" as big as aircraft hovering at a height of 200 to 300 metres. Others in mid-July also saw aliens with no heads, the paper said.

It was Socialist Industry as well that informed Soviets yesterday of the huge, fleet-footed hairy creature that terrified residents in the Volga basin.

"I saw the creature pretty well," resident R. Saitov said. "It was about 2 metres tall, its body covered with dark brown hair and it had shoulder-length hair. Being a veterinary surgeon, I can say the creature was neither a man nor an ape."

The newspaper noted disapprovingly that Saratov University biologists weren't taking reports of the sighting seriously or even deigning to talk to witnesses.