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The Martians aren't coming

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British UFO-spotting clubs may have to close because of a lack of sightings. Have the little green men really stopped visiting, or do we earthlings just have bigger things to worry about?

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It may only be a small, translucent green gleam on the horizon, but there are signs of a crisis in UFO-spotting. Chris Parr, coordinator of the Cumbrian branch of the British UFO Hunters, sent a shiver through the hearts of ufologists with his announcement this week that his group may be forced to wind up. There don't seem to be any UFOs in Cumbria any more.

Or maybe there just aren't any spotters. Parr's statement seemed to leave both possibilities open. "In Cumbria we have gone from 60 UFO sightings in 2003 to 40 in 2004 and none at all this year. It means that the number of people keeping their eyes on the skies is greatly diminished. We are a dying breed in this part of the country. I put it down to the end of The X Files, a lack of military exercises in the area that would produce UFO sightings, and a lack of strange phenomena." A lack of strange phenomena or a shortage of strange people? Take your pick.

It has not been a happy couple of years for ufology. The closure last year of UFO magazine, following the sudden death of its editor Graham Birdsall, was a disaster for the close-knit UFO-spotting community. Several websites have sprung up to try to fill the void, but the best-known one, Ufodata - launched by Russel Callaghan, who used to work with Birdsall, his father-in-law, on UFO Magazine - kept making my computer crash. Spooky.

Parr's statement echoes those of UFO groups in Indiana and New Jersey, where ufologists are also having a long, dark night of the soul. Meanwhile, a leading Scandinavian ufologist has suggested that "maybe people are just fed up with the UFO hysteria". The sceptics reckon they have enough evidence to pronounce ufology dead.

"The whole UFO thing is a kind of meme," says Susan Blackmore, a psychologist who studies paranormal activity. "It's a craze, a bit like sudoku. UFOs were just a rather long-lived version. But crazes thrive on novelty, and eventually that dies out. It's taken a long time, but it's good that the UFO era is over. My prediction is that it will go away for a long time and then come back."

Blackmore has spent most of her working life examining the paranormal. She became interested in the subject after what she describes as a "dramatic out-of-body experience", and reached the conclusion that there really is nothing out there. "Everything is explicable in terms of psychology," she says. "I'm as sure as you can be that there are no paranormal experiences, and I've spent 30 years looking."

She says belief in UFOs and the existence of extraterrestrials, while mostly harmless, can in some cases be very damaging. "For most people, belief in them is neither here nor there," she says, "but some people can become very frightened and obsessed. It can also lead to an anti-science attitude and the belief that everything is being hushed up."

Britain's beleaguered band of ufologists are not, however, going to give up without a fight. "Cumbria is a delightful part of the country, but it has a small population and you shouldn't read anything into the fact that no UFOs are being spotted there," says Callaghan. He is currently excited, for example, by the extra- ordinary level of UFO activity in Filey, North Yorkshire, where he says there have been 80 reports in the past eight months. Russ Kellett, who describes himself as a UFO researcher, has been documenting them. "In Filey Bay there have been sightings of something that looks like a flying triangle," he says. "They are not conventional aircraft. They keep appearing and disappearing, defying the laws of physics. I've got video evidence and will be showing it at the Great British UFO Show in Leeds in October."

As is often the case with committed ufologists, Kellett's interest dates from a personal "close encounter" in 1988. "I was sat at a level crossing on a motorbike," he recalls, "when suddenly I was aware of light all around me and a beam of light hitting me. The crossing went up so I carried on, but I saw this big ball of light moving towards Halifax." Kellett is one of those who believes there is an official cover-up of the number of UFO incidents. "You can't have panic," he says. "All we can hope is that someone will bring the truth out about this."

Veteran ufologist Denis Plunkett, founder chairman of the British Flying Saucer Bureau, accepts that "there is not a lot happening at the moment" and that "the loss of the magazine was a great blow - Birdsall was a shining light". But he, too, insists that ufology should not be written off. "Belief in UFOs and extraterrestrial life has gone up from 10% of the population to 80% over the 50-plus years

the BFSB has existed."

Plunkett, a former civil servant who says his career suffered because of his publicly stated belief in flying saucers, argues that the evidence for extraterrestrials is "incontrovertible". He believes extraterrestrial life forms visit earth frequently. "They seem to be observing us but not interfering with us," he says.

Nick Pope, author of Open Skies, Closed Minds, used to run the Ministry of Defence's UFO project. He began as a sceptic, but the difficulty he had in explaining some cases he assessed shook that scepticism. "I became more open when I was there," he says. "Now I won't rule out an extraterrestrial explanation. During my three-year tour of duty from 1991 to 94, I had to investigate 200 to 300 sightings a year: 80% of them had perfectly rational explanations - meteors, satellites, weather patterns; with another 15% it was difficult to reach any conclusion; but with about 5% there was evidence of something more intriguing."

It was 1978, he says, that was "the peak in UFO sightings [it helped that Close Encounters of the Third Kind had been released the previous year], when there were 750 reports. We have seen these UFO waves many times. If a paper runs a UFO story and puts a line at the bottom saying, 'If you have seen a UFO, ring us,' they will be inundated. You try it."

David Clarke, a historian at Sheffield University and the Fortean Times' UFO correspondent, is not convinced by the "peaks and troughs" line. "People haven't stopped believing, but they do seem to be seeing far less than they did and it's not clear why," he says. "There's been a massive drop in sightings since 1996, which is when The X Files was on TV. It may also be that since 9/11 people have had other things to worry about. There is not just less interest in UFOs, but in all supernatural phenomena. People are more worried about terrorist bombs. The MoD also lost interest in UFOs when the cold war ended: what they had really been looking for was Russian intruder aircraft. They only collate sightings now because MPs keep asking questions about UFOs."

So is there a crisis in ufology? Joe McGonagle, who runs UFOlogyinuk, the main internet newsgroup for British ufologists, believes there is. "Ufology has shot itself in both feet and needs drastic surgery in order to recover," he told his 1,000-strong membership yesterday in an emailed response to the news from Cumbria. "Ufology is suffering from the paranoid accusations of government cover-ups which some of the more vociferous groups and individuals are all too willing to believe and kick up a fuss about. All of these things drive people away from what is already a peculiar subject."

It isn't just Cumbria. McGonagle points to the decline in the number of local UFO clubs as ufologists get their information from the internet instead; apathy among the public (oddly, he links the failure to report sightings to the falling turnout in general elections); and a general "loss of focus" in ufology. The great flying saucer-spotting days of the mid-20th century are long gone. Contrast the panic generated by Orson Welles' radio broadcast of The War of the Worlds in 1938 with the indifference which greeted Tom Cruise's recent "blockbuster" movie version.

David Clarke thinks the rise and fall of ufology is a rich subject for study and is currently trying to attract funds for just such an undertaking. "I see it as part of modern folklore," he says. "UFOs are like modern-day angels, and descriptions of meeting aliens are just like descriptions of people meeting angels in the Middle Ages." Filey was probably big on angels, too.

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