

[50p a week](#)

France became the first country to open its files on UFOs on Thursday when the national space agency unveiled a website documenting more than 1600 sightings spanning five decades.

The online archives, which will be updated as new cases are reported, catalogues in minute detail cases ranging from the easily dismissed to a handful that continue to perplex even hard-nosed scientists.

“It is a world first,” says Jacques Patenet, the aeronautical engineer who heads the office for the study of “non-identified aerospace phenomena.”

Known as OVNI in French, UFOs have always generated intense interest along with countless conspiracy theories about secretive government cover-ups of findings deemed too sensitive or alarming for public consumption.

“Cases such as the lady who reported seeing an object that looked like a flying roll of toilet paper” are clearly not worth investigating, says Patenet.

But many others involving multiple sightings – in at least one case involving thousands of people across France – and evidence such as burn marks and radar trackings showing flight patterns or accelerations that defy the laws of physics are taken very seriously.

No explanation

A phalanx of beefy security guards formed a barrier in front of the space agency (CNES) headquarters where the announcement was made, “to screen out uninvited UFOlogists,” an official explained.

Of the 1600 cases registered since 1954, nearly 25% are classified as “type D”, meaning that “despite good or very good data and credible witnesses, we are confronted with something we can’t explain”, Patenet says.

On 8 January 1981 outside the town of Trans-en-Provence in southern France, for example, a man working in a field reported hearing a strange whistling sound and seeing a saucer-like object about 2.5 metres in diameter land in his field about 50 metres away.

“It stayed for a few seconds then took off into the blue yonder without making a sound,” says Patenet. When the GEIPAN team went to investigate they found burn marks in the soil suggesting that the object weighed a couple of hundred kilograms. “I have never been able to understand or explain that incident,” says Patenet.

Flashing lights

The nearly 1000 witnesses who said they saw flashing lights in the sky on 5 November 1990, by contrast, had simply seen a rocket fragment falling back into Earth’s atmosphere.

“We do not have the least proof that extra-terrestrials are behind the unexplained phenomena,” says Patenet, adding: “Nor do we have the least proof that they aren’t.”

The online database should help scientists interested in studying the mysterious observations, he told **New Scientist**: “We also want to send a message to more scientists, inviting them to help us analyse these phenomena, when otherwise they might feel uneasy about these issues.”

The CNES fields between 50 and 100 UFO reports every year, usually written up by police. Of these, 10% are the object of on-site investigations, Patenet says.

Other countries, notably Britain and the US, collect data more or less systematically about unidentified flying objects. In the US, information can be requested on a case-by-case basis under the Freedom of Information Act.

“But we decided to do it the other way around and made everything available to the public,” Patenet says.

The aim was to make it easier for scientists and other UFO buffs to access the data for research. The [website](#) itself – which crashed host servers hours after it was unveiled due to heavy traffic – is extremely well organised and complete, even including scanned copies of police reports.



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