



The Newsletter of The North Texas Skeptics

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In the trenches

Stories from the "creation science" front

By Curtis Severns <cseverns@dallas.quick.com>

In early October of last year John Blanton passed along an ad for a meeting the following Tuesday. Little did I know, John's e-mail would turn out to be a sort of "draft notice" sending me to the "front lines" in the creation vs. evolution stalemate. The ad was for the monthly gathering of Metroplex Institute of Origin Science (MIOS), a young earth creationist organization. That week Don R. Patton, Ph.D. (or rather supposed Ph.D.1), would discuss "The Evidence from Biological Similarities." In December 1997 I viewed a PBS Firing Line debate where young and old earth creationists discussed "ontogeny recapitulates phylogeny," among other subjects². Therefore, I had a good idea of Patton's attack strategy. After deciding to attend the meeting, I searched the internet for information on the subject. I'll give details about Patton's talk and my findings in next month's newsletter. I will also include a related story about Hank Hanegraaff and a review of his new book *The Face That Demonstrates The Farce Of Evolution*.

During the meeting's question and answer period, I confronted Patton on some points in his presentation. The debate led to an exchange about abortion, during which Patton mistakenly assumed I was pro-abortion. He subsequently called me an "evil man," and tried his best to overlook my requests to ask further questions. Afterwards, three MIOS members apologized for Patton's behavior. Following a long discussion in the parking lot with two of the members, Nathan and Steve, Nathan's wife invited everyone over to their home for dinner the next Sunday. We accepted and continued our very pleasant discussion on Sunday.

Before leaving Nathan's home, Steve gave me two video tapes featuring Robert Gentry and his research. He claimed the research in the videos contained irrefutable evidence of a young earth. I agreed to watch the videos and to report back on my investigation into Gentry's claims. That investigation culminated in my presentation at the February NTS meeting. For the sake of time I limited the presentation to only one video, "Fingerprints of Creation."³ For those who did not attend the meeting (which includes most of you) I'll give a brief overview, including a few updates.

In the late 1960s and early 1970s Gentry published a series of papers describing his study of polonium pleochroic halos and his interpretation of their relation to the earth's age.⁴ Pleochroic halos are formed in granites when alpha particles are emitted from radioactive elements such as uranium. The alpha particles are propelled in all directions through the granite leaving discolored trails of damaged crystal lattice. The alpha particles' emissions of each radioactive element has a characteristic energy which propels the particle a specific distance. Consequently, each element's emissions create a sphere of discoloration with a unique radius (see Figure 1). In order to view the halos, the granite is sectioned through the center of the halo revealing the circular discolorations. Since each circle has a radius unique to a particular radioactive element, the source element is easily identified in most cases.⁵

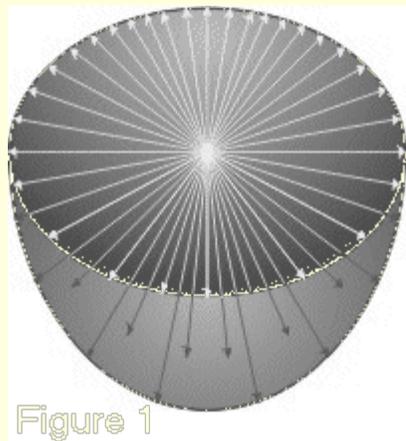


Figure 1

The halo effect occurs when two different elements radiate alpha particles from the same location. This happens when uranium decays through several elemental stages until it eventually becomes a stable lead, which does not emit particles. The daughter element emits alpha particles through the damage trail from the parent. The result is multiple halos corresponding to the number of decay stages (see Figure 2).

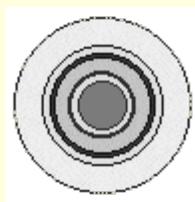


Figure 2

Uranium decays through several stages and not only does each have a characteristic energy but each also has a characteristic half-life. Radioactive elements decay at an exponential rate. Therefore the decay rate is measured by the time it takes for half of the atoms to decay to its daughter element. Uranium-238's half-life is 4.5 billion years at which time half of the atoms would remain. The rest would have decayed to thorium-234 and on to other daughter elements. After another 4.5 billion years only one quarter of the original uranium atoms would remain, then an eighth and so on. The different decay rates are constant under normal circumstances and are well established by science.⁶ The final four alpha emitting daughter elements of uranium-238 are radon-222, polonium-218, polonium-214, and polonium-210. These are the elements relevant to the remainder of this article.

The half-lives of the four daughter elements are relatively short: radon-222 = 3.82 days, polonium-218 = 3.05 minutes, polonium-214 = less than 200 microseconds, and polonium-210 = 140 days. From here on I will refer to radon-222 as simply Ra222, and the three polonium isotopes will be referred to as Po218, Po214, and Po210. Notice the half-lives of the first two polonium isotopes. They are very short — 3.05 minutes and less than 200 microseconds, respectively. The aim of Gentry's studies was to prove that certain primordial granites, that is granites that were formed during the original cooling of the earth, contained pleochroic halos from polonium isotopes. Specifically, he wanted to prove certain halos, commonly found in the granite minerals biotite and fluorite, were caused by primary polonium elements present when the granite first cooled during creation. An idealized drawing of a halo formed by only the three polonium daughters is shown in Figure 3.

At the surface, Gentry's interpretation seems compelling. His halos do not have the additional rings found in complete uranium-238 halos, as shown in Figure 2. Measurements show the rings have radii indicative of certain polonium isotopes. There is no evidence of uranium at the halo center. According to Gentry, there are no means for polonium to

be inserted into the granite after cooling. If everything Gentry claims is true then the earth had to cool in about three minutes, the half-life of Po218, the first ring to form. Longer cooling periods, especially the millions of years science suggests, would deplete the polonium long before halos could form in the hardened rock. Even the most committed atheist couldn't explain a 3 minute cooling time without invoking a creator.

With further investigation however, Gentry's interpretation is obviously flawed. The first attempts to dispute his assertions, though on the right track, fell short and were easily dismissed by Gentry. They included hydrothermal injection of polonium (York 1979), uranium release during weathering (Meier 1976), and variants of uranium halos (Moazed 1973). All of these theories and others were put forth during the 1970s and early 1980s⁷. This is important because, in his 1994 video, Gentry claimed no one has even attempted to dispute his evidence. He decried it as "stunned silence." As a response to a book written by Gentry⁴ (1986), a few geologists, in the late 1980s and early 1990s, studied the sites where Gentry got his granite samples and the specific type of granite Gentry used. They published their findings in some of the same journals as Gentry⁸. Even our very own Ron Hastings apparently wrote a commentary on the subject. I guess if Gentry doesn't agree with reviews of his work then he ignores them all together, a response seemingly contagious among "creation scientists."

There are several odd facts surrounding Gentry's claims. Each of Gentry's samples came from granites which formed as veins during the precambrian period, long after the primordial origin of nearby terrain. Second, polonium halos are only found at sites rich with uranium ores. All of Gentry's samples came from sites near uranium mines (Wakefield 1988). Third, polonium halos only appear in certain biotite and fluorite bearing granites and not in any of the surrounding rocks. Biotite and fluorite are products of replacement mineral intergrowth that formed the veins in the first place (Hunt 1992). Last, only Po218 halos and those of its daughter isotopes are ever found. Apparently God was picky about the types of halos he formed and where he put them.

The facts all come together when you consider radon, an inert gas, dissolves in hydrous fluids. Polonium, on the other hand, is a solid and easily falls out of solution once formed. Ra222, the parent of Po218, has a half-life of 3.82 days, plenty of time to circulate through cracks and fissures. This is evident by the many companies selling home radon detectors. There are several less abundant radon isotopes which decay to different polonium isotopes than those of Ra222. The longest half-life of these other radon isotopes is 54.5 seconds. Their polonium daughter half-lives are measured in fractions of seconds, not allowing much time for travel to isolated secondary locations.

Seismic activity opens cracks causing a vacuum into which hydrous fluids carry Ra222. The Ra222 falls out of solution when it decays to Po218. The crystal lattice structure of biotite and fluorite contain sites that can accommodate negatively charged fluoride and hydroxyl ions. Po218, Po214, and Po210 are also negatively charged ions similar in size to fluoride and hydroxyl ions. Consequently, polonium isotopes take up lattice positions and concentrate in the biotite and fluorite crystals. The continued replacement mineral intergrowth fills in some of the original cracks giving the appearance of undisturbed granite (Hunt 1992). Although most pictures show halos either along or near obvious cracks.

With this information, it made sense that some, so called Po218 halos, would show traces of Ra222 rings. The problem with finding evidence of Ra222 halos, and the reason Gentry's research avoided radon's mention, is that Ra222 rings and Po210 rings have almost identical radius. The two rings would only show up as one large ring (see Figure 4). Unfortunately, I have not been able to find a single picture of a known radon halo. However, while preparing for my presentation, I noticed all the so called Po218 halos in Gentry's own video had large Po210 rings (see Figure 5). Upon closer inspection, I noticed that almost all of the large rings had a distinct outer ring as would be expected in Ra222 halos. The distinct outer ring could not be clearly seen in pictures from Gentry's book or articles. I'm not saying he altered the pictures from the printed media but the larger size and finer grain of video gave the rings more detail.

Figures 3 and 4

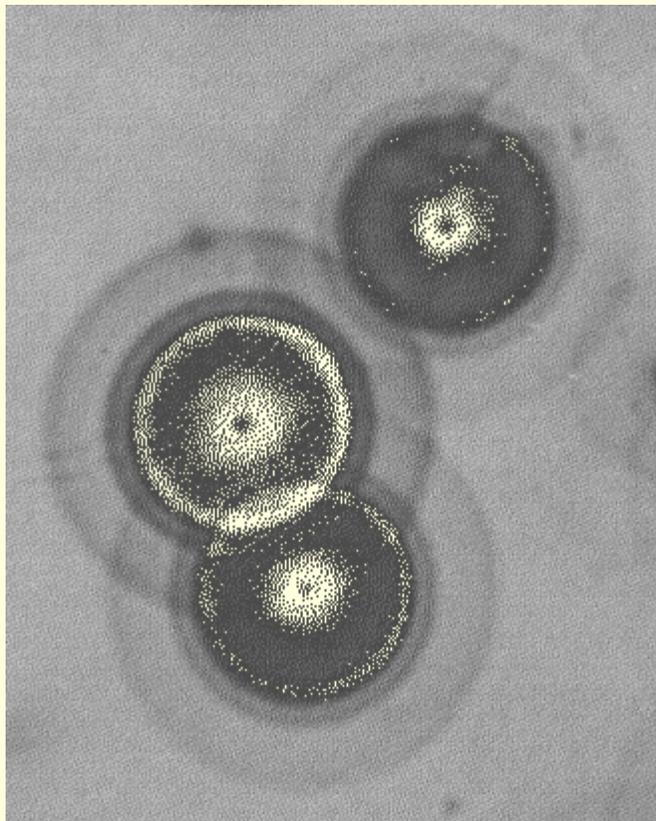
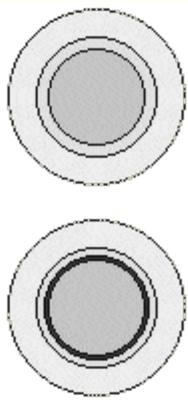


Figure 5.

When I passed all my findings along to Steve and Nathan, they seemed interested and listened to some of my explanations of the evidence. However, they neglected to attend my presentation. Steve later admitted it didn't matter what facts I presented; he was creationist to the core. He told me this after accusing me of being closed minded on creationism and continued to insist his open mindedness about science. A geologist who presented the February MIOS meeting claimed he work with Gentry during his halo research. He overheard my conversation with Steve and asked if I knew Gentry's halos were primary. I tried to explain why they were not and he dismissed the idea. He did, however, agree to take a look at some of the information available on the internet. I'm not holding my breath.

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Healthy skepticism

IGNORANCE AND ARROGANCE

By Tim Gorski MD

In "A Lesson In Chemistry and Chicanery" [The Skeptic, March 1999] well over a thousand words were devoted to a very superficial discussion of chemistry in order to support a much more succinct dismissal of a "nutritional supplement" product as being a preposterous fraud. But absurd claims remain absurd claims whether or not the ignorant

understand why. The task of skeptics is to help themselves and others overcome ignorance, of course, but some people will always insist on believing weird things.

Not long ago, for example, I briefly dealt with a popular diet book by “naturopathic physician” Peter J. D’Adamo entitled *Eat Right 4 Your Type* in which it was claimed that one’s blood type determines how one should eat. When I first heard about this book, I had a good laugh and moved on to other things since it seemed headed for the remainder houses. Then, when it was picked up by the Book of the Month Club as an alternate selection, I mentioned it in my monthly column directed to my medical colleagues in *The Tarrant County Physician* as follows:

And if he can succeed with this awesome nonsense, “Dr.” D’Adamo can get to work on sequels that might explain how people can “eat right” for their Rh factors and the rest of their red cell antigens, not to mention their HLA types, hemoglobin electrophoresis profiles, and maybe even their genotypes and the residual vibrations of their ancestors’ genotypes even if they didn’t get them by heredity! The sober conclusion to be drawn, though, is that many people remain woefully uninformed about the most elementary facts relating to their lives and health. People who would scoff at a proposal that a car’s paint color determines what sort of gasoline or oil should be used for the vehicle or that a home’s exterior brickwork determines how the furniture inside should be arranged are nevertheless apparently willing to consider this particular delusion.

These remarks reflected the fact that blood types, of which there are far more than the ABO group, merely reflect the sort of immunologic identifying molecules, or antigens, that happen to be on the outsides of people’s cells. HLA types amount to the same thing. And genotypes – the exact genetic heritage one possesses – may or may not be reflected in one’s phenotype of expressed genes. So, for example, a brown-eyed person may have a recessive gene for blue eyes. But there is no reason for supposing that one’s diet should be dictated by such things, any more than that people should eat differently depending on the shape of their fingernails or the size of their parents’ noses. To anyone who understands the facts concerning blood groups, in other words, D’Adamo’s claims are plainly nonsensical.

But it seems that many people don’t understand these facts, which accounts for the following email that I received by someone who was incensed by my dismissal of D’Adamo’s book:

“I think your analogy with the car is incorrect (about the blood type diet). Instead of saying that every person would know that the colour of the car does not determine the gasoline or oil to be used, you should say that the type of engine determines the type of fuel to be used. Because the food we eat is the fuel by which we move. I think it is also presumptuous to shoot down a book by using some wishy washy analogy instead of scientific evidence. If you were to give some proof instead of some arrogant sarcastic commentary I might have been interested in what you had to say.”

Of course, it is true that a vehicle’s fuel needs are not determined by its paint color. That was the whole point of my use of the analogy in illustrating what D’Adamo’s advice amounts to. Of course a person’s diet should be determined by the needs and characteristics of their “engine,” which is to say, their metabolic needs (as well as their metabolic idiosyncrasies). Thus, phenylketonurics should avoid certain foods and/or additives rich in the amino acid phenylalanine, diabetics need to follow special diets, and people with certain intestinal disorders need to include or avoid various dietary constituents. But none of these things have anything to do with people’s blood types! Nor are individual human beings so different from each other in terms of their ordinary (not associated with any medical disorders) dietary needs as they are from, say, koala bears who subsist solely on eucalyptus leaves.

In all fairness, D’Adamo does his best to make his argument subtle, if not plausible. The essence of his claim is that the ABO blood groups are a sort of marker for underlying metabolic differences between people. But this hardly helps matters because, if it were so, then every other sort of seemingly irrelevant genetic trait should be at least as good a marker as well: the aforementioned other blood types, HLA types, hair color, eye color, complexion, and so on. Most importantly, there simply is no evidence for D’Adamo’s ideas, which is a good part of what makes them so absurd.

All such considerations, of course, are “wishy-washy” to true believers. For them, only a meticulous, exhaustive, and point-by-point refutation of each and every speculative notion that someone as creative as D’Adamo can imagine is sufficient to demonstrate fairness. But it is rare that even this will be sufficient enough to persuade them of their errors. For they are only “interested in” showing their unswerving devotion to their chosen nonsense in the face of “arrogant”

and “sarcastic” criticism. Indeed no amount of facts and reason will dissuade true believers, because their beliefs are acts of faith and not conclusions of facts and reason.

This, in the final analysis, is the nature of the divide between people who believe weird things and those who are not satisfied unless they have sufficient facts and reason. The believers are certain that they have the truth, and consider all who doubt and scorn their truth to be arrogant fault-finders if not members of the relevant conspiracy. Skeptics, on the other hand, know only too well the tentative and fragile nature of human understanding, and how easy it is to be fooled. That is why they insist on protecting valid knowledge, especially the most valuable and well-established of it, from both groundless attack and unworthy pretenders. For the worst sort of arrogance is ignorance.

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Pharmacy school: water causes cancer

The following first appeared in The Daily Texan, Student Newspaper of the University of Texas at Austin and is reprinted here with permission.

By Roahn Wynar

Dateline — 11 March 1998

During UT Interactive, the College of Pharmacy sponsored an event that provided the public with the following bombshell information: 1) Chlorine in our water supply has been implicated in one-third of all breast cancers 2) Tap water promotes bladder and rectal cancer; 3) Chlorinated tap water inhibits our ability to absorb vitamins. We also learned how chlorine’s evil big brother, fluorine, causes our bones to fall apart and facilitates aluminum poisoning.

All of these claims originate from the paranoid anti-fluoridation movement which is trying to turn the tide on one of the most successful public health policies ever devised, the fluoridation of public drinking water.

In case you want to go to bottled water, beware. The College of Pharmacy is promoting the idea that the plasticizer that makes plastic bottles soft has “estrogenic activity” which, of course, leads to cancer.

There are other dangers that the College of Pharmacy is anxious for you to know about: The waxes used to beautify store-bought fruit is toxic. If you are allergic to corn, you should not eat “corn-fed beef.” College of Pharmacy solution: eat only organic fruits and “free-range beef.” Whew, thanks, College of Pharmacy!

This alarmist material was delivered by a College of Pharmacy Continuing Education lecturer Don Bottoni. Mr. Bottoni is what we call a “classical quack.” Unlike the quacks that parade throughout the School of Nursing, he does not wear crystals and do yoga. He maintains the conservative appearance of a respectable pharmacist and presents his nonsense as commonly accepted medical knowledge. He is a distinguished older gentleman who mindlessly blathers about the ubiquity of poisons. He claims he’s done “independent reading” on the subject of herbs.

The typical plan of action for a quack lecture is to start slowly and accelerate the stupidity once the audience has been disarmed. Bottoni began with statements like, “We must all take a personal interest in our own health,” and “The answer to our health problems is not sitting on some shelf in a pharmacy.” Once he observes the unsuspecting crowd nodding their heads in agreement, he dove into his anti-fluoridation propaganda. The audience lapped up every stupid notion and popped up softball questions like, “If I drink grapefruit juice with my ginseng, will I deplete the root’s long acknowledged mystic healing power?”

After he suggested that plastic bottles are poisonous, we wondered exactly how stupid he was willing to get. We asked, “Do homeopathic remedies have any efficacy beyond the placebo effect?” Homeopathy is a magic-based treatment system that involves diluting and shaking some randomly chosen substance in water or alcohol dozens of times and then making exotic claims about its curative properties. This obvious sham was invented hundreds of years ago, but it is tremendously popular with the herbal crowd. Bottoni diverted himself into a 10-minute mini-lecture about the

remarkable power of homeopathic medicine, the energy fields of the body ... yada yada yada. In fact, he claimed homeopathic remedies are so powerful they can be dangerous.

This amounts to the College of Pharmacy endorsing magical pharmacy practice. To add insult to injury, they are even wrong about that magic! No one known to this author has ever claimed that homeopathy is risky except Bottoni.

How could the college sponsor an instructor who is promoting anti-scientific, unsubstantiated health notions? We hope the answer is that nobody was looking.

The College of Pharmacy Continuing Education Program is directed by an administrator who is not a faculty member and her first layer of oversight seems to be the dean, who obviously wasn't paying attention. Continuing education is aimed at practicing pharmacists and the information presented there becomes part of their professional identity. What a shame.

Also we stopped by the UT Interactive "Ask a pharmacist" station and tried to get the straight scoop on the mystic practice of homeopathy. Both pharmacists on duty had just completed Bottoni's professional course. We give our health center pharmacists a C+ for their response.

"Homeopathy is a different system of medicine," they explained. "You have to believe in that system or it won't work." After listening patiently, it was clear they were going to let us leave without mentioning the slightly important fact that homeopathy has no scientific validity and should never be relied upon to treat any serious health condition. Exasperated, we asked, "My buddy has diabetes and is trying to get off his insulin by using homeopathic remedies. Is that a good idea?"

The pharmacist paused and only then did he say, "I have a problem with that."

(Roahn Wynar is a physics graduate student and columnist for The Daily Texan.)

Responses

To clear things up

I want to respond to the editorial by Mr. [Roahn] Wynar in the March 11 issue [of The Daily Texan]. I would give him a "D-" for his listening and comprehension skills. First, I did not say I had attended Mr. Bottoni's talk or have I ever attended one of his talks. Second, I tried to explain to Mr. Wynar my understanding of homeopathy and said that not all people practice the same medical beliefs and that that I respect the right of people to believe what they want. Mr. Wynar should consider taking a simple undergraduate class in communication before he fabricates statements in an editorial.

— James C. Parker Chief pharmacist, University Health Services Pharmacy

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Sky fishing

By Curtis Severns <cseverns@dallas.quick.com>

What's the newest craze among UFO fans? That's right "sky fishing." What is sky fishing you may ask? Well, grab your pole, or rather your camera, and let's find out. Yes, you can film the elusive "sky fish," also known as "rods," right in your own back yard. For a meager three payments of just \$9.95 a month, charged to your Visa or Master Card, Ben Dover Productions will send you an amazing video showing all you need to know to catch your very own "sky fish." On film that is.

However, as a special offer to The Skeptic readers we're going to give you an exclusive inside peek at the world of "sky fishing." It all started back in March 1994 near Roswell, New Mexico, and the infamous "Area 51." Jose Escamilla,

while scanning through UFO footage, found some interesting images of something unlike anything he had noticed before. “Some very unusual objects” appeared in one of his daily taping of the skies around Midway, New Mexico. Yes, that’s right — UFOs appear so often near the Escamilla family farm that they video tape the skies daily. And for a small fee you can come sit on their porch and view them for yourself. However, these new UFOs were unlike the others.

The new UFOs only show up in video footage. Why you ask? Well, it seems that “rods” are moving so fast that they are virtually invisible to the naked eye. However, the “rods,” which vary from a few feet long to over a hundred feet long, will show up in just a few frames of video footage, as in Figure 1.



Figure 1

“Rods” get their name because the blurry images appear to be long rod like animals with wings. Yes, you heard me correctly, animals. Footage taken with the shutter speed set at 1/60th of a second, shows short “rods” making tight turns in the mouth of a cave just like a bird or bug would do. Some of the same slow footage, found at www.roswellrods.com, shows a cave swallow flying from a nest to give chase after a “rod,” but the “rod” quickly pulls away from the swallow. Now don’t worry that the blurry images of the swallow have some striking similarities to the “rod,” nor that all footage taken so far looks like the blurred, elongated images of bugs, birds, or projectiles moving quickly across the screen. Because Escamilla and others have done tests with the same brand of camera used in the cave footage.

In the tests, Escamilla’s camera, set to its highest setting 1/10,000th of a second shutter speed, shows almost crisp stills of birds, bugs, and projectiles. The test images look nothing like the “rods” in the footage taken at the slower speed. Now your next question may be, is there any “rod” footage at the highest setting? Of course there is. In the 1/10,000th of a second footage — or is that 1/10,000th of a minute — well which ever, the “rods” show up as only straight wingless rods estimated to be up to 100 feet long. While in the slower footage, they show up as short blurred winged “rods” like the one shown in Figure 1.

Next you may ask, are the cave “rods” caused by long exposure times stretching the sun’s reflections off swallows diving in and out of the cave’s mouth at high speeds. A similar effect to the photography trick where car lights are elongated to give the illusion of speed. Escamilla has footage of “rods” flying into the shadows caused by the cave’s mouth and one frame obviously shows the shadow falling right across the “rods” torso. Now as Jim Peters of the Colorado Mutual UFO Network (MUFON) put it, “How can a ‘blur’ have a shadow cast across it?” Plus, you can see that the translucent wings run the length of the “rod.” They fly by wiggling their wings much like a cuttle fish. See the computer generated “rod” in Figure 2. Oh, and speaking of fish, others have filmed “rods” flying in and out of the water without losing speed. And if that doesn’t totally amaze you, “rods” have also been filmed flying in and out of the ground in much the same way.

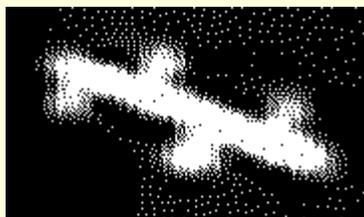


Figure 2

So if you’re convinced that “rods” are a previously unknown species of animal, then contact the author and he will gladly sell you the previously mentioned instructional video tape. Or, for a slightly larger fee, the author will take you on your very own “sky fishing” expedition.

**Note: The previous article was an advertisement intended to sell a product (well sort of) and is in no way intended as an endorsement by this newsletter or the North Texas Skeptics or any other rational person.*

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