

The event became known throughout the world as a definite encounter with a spacecraft.

"But the Knowles' claims about their car could not be backed up by inspections, although it was given a thorough going-over by police and UFO research groups," Mr Brunt said.

"The dents in the roof were not significant and the only unusual feature of the event was the egg-shaped light they saw."

The second incident occurred about 1am on October 17 in roughly the same area.

A bus driven by Mr Peter Chapman with 25 pas-

sengers on board was travelling west along the Eyre Highway about 20km west of the Mundrabilla roadhouse.

The driver saw a light on the northern side of the vehicle and woke five passengers who also saw the light.

Although he was reported to be terrified, he did not wake the other 20 passengers and he didn't stop to observe what he described as a bright white light which hovered 20m above the ground and seemed to be moving.

He said it followed the bus for about 16km as he travelled at high speed to escape.

Mr Brunt, who is one of the few scientists to have made a study of optical meteorology, said there were dozens of causes of unusual lights in

dozens of causes of unusual lights in the atmosphere.

The best approach was to try to eliminate all other phenomena.

An examination of the upper air temperature profiles at Forrest, the nearest weather station, about 100km to the north, showed a marked temperature inversion with warm air overlying colder air.

Cloudless skies

On January 22, a strong high pressure area extended from west of Perth across to Ceduna with a covering of low cloud and very light winds.

On October 17 there was a high pressure area over the head of the Great Australian Bight, the skies were almost cloudless and again there were very light winds.

"Light travels in straight lines when we are dealing with a homogenous medium," Mr Brunt said.

"The atmosphere is homogenous except when there are sharp discontinuities in the air column.

"One of the main discontinuities is a pronounced temperature inversion during cold weather when there is a sharp difference in the air above and below the inversion.

"This causes refraction and the path of light is bent downwards, giving the impression the object seen is much higher than it really is.

"Light reacts the opposite way during hot weather to produce a mirage, when objects seem to be displaced from their true position.

"The most common example is when motorists think they see water

when motorists think they see water ahead of them on a bitumen road but what they are really seeing is the sky."



Wave front

Less dense

in which observer sees a mirage of the truck lights

Inversion layer

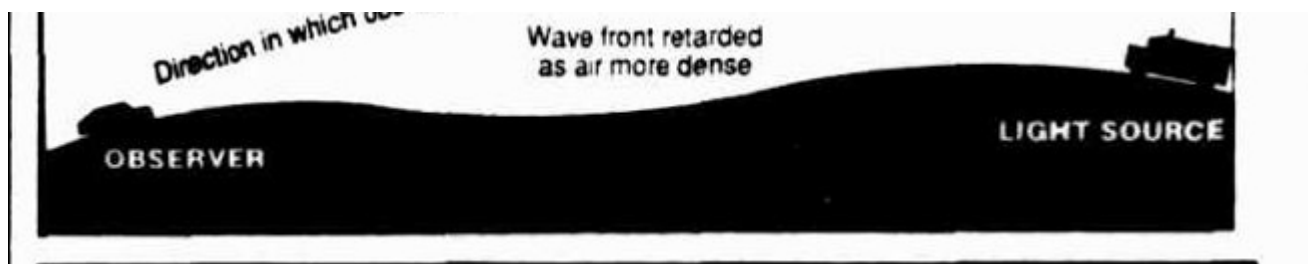
Inversion layer

Wave front retarded

Wave front speeded up as air less dense

Superior mirage. Bright truck light in the sky





Alien visitations to the Nullarbor seemed a certainty after some convincing sightings last year. But, as Alex Harris discovered, one scientist has a perfect meteorological explanation for the strange encounters with bright lights hovering over the plain.

Flying saucers of Nullarbor just an illusion

THE MYSTERY of dancing lights that are occasionally reported to chase cars along the Nullarbor and terrify their occupants seems to be solved.

According to Mr Alan Brunt, a retired regional director of meteorology in South Australia, the lights are night time mirages caused by refraction.

They appear when light from a truck's headlights strike a tempera-

truck's headlights strike a temperature inversion, bend and bounce back to earth.

He says these meteorological events are certainly not flying saucers and have never hurt anyone. They are, in fact, similar to Queensland's famous Min-Min lights, which have been reported many times to be bobbing above the tree tops.

In both states they always appear on calm, clear nights.

on calm, clear nights.

Two of the most celebrated cases of dancing lights on the Nullarbor occurred last year but Mr Brunt said he had records of more than 100 similar events going back nearly 40 years, well before Unidentified Flying Objects had been invented.

The first of the 1988 incidents occurred about 4.30am on January 20, when the Knowles family was travelling eastwards along the Eyre Highway.

About 40km west of Mundrabilla roadhouse they saw a light over the road ahead of them. At first they thought it was the light from a truck approaching them from the east but the light became brighter and bigger, frightening them into taking evasive action.

They described the light's shape as like "an egg in an eggcup" which disappeared after "jumping about a bit".

It was about a metre wide and its colour was bright and white with a yellow centre.

A truck driver travelling east some distance ahead of them also saw a strange light above the road and the crew of a tuna boat near the head of the Great Australian Bight saw a light they said was elongated in the vertical.

The Knowles family claimed their car was picked up and dumped by a UFO, bursting a tyre in an abnormal fashion.

They also claimed a black ash covered the car and the UFO made indentations in the roof.

They drove off at high speed to escape and were obviously distressed and somewhat hysterical when first interviewed.

interviewed.