

SCIENCE MATTERS



Tropical storms

A rogue cyclone devastated parts of the remote island nation of Tuvalu, which rarely sees such storms. The telephone operator on the southern atoll of Niulakita was only able to communicate by Morse code after cyclone Keli hit first. She reported that all the buildings on the island, except the church, had been destroyed. Then the storm doubled back, and hit the island again, silencing the weak radiotelegraph signal. The fate of the island's 55 inhabitants was unknown. Typhoon Opal formed east of the Philippines, then pounded Japan's southern coast with winds of nearly 162 km/h late in the week.

Antarctic chill

A fierce winter-like storm swept across a broad area of South America during the final days of the southern autumn. Heavy snows in the Andes trapped several people, including foreign engineers and miners in the mountains of western Argentina. The storm triggered high winds across Brazil, which downed several buildings in the south of the country, leaving hundreds of families homeless. The early chill produced a frost in the country's key coffee-growing region, but rains that immediately followed protected the crops from significant damage.

Gorilla rescue

French troops took time out from evacuating foreign nationals from the strife-torn Congolese capital of Brazzaville to rescue eight baby gorillas endangered by the fighting. The France-Soir newspaper reported that four of the youngest orphaned apes, whose mothers had been killed by poachers, were sent to the Congolese port of Pointe-Noire for safety.

Earthquakes

A magnitude 5.2 earthquake rocked the same area of eastern Iran that was devastated by a more powerful temblor in May. The latest

It came from outer space

50 years after the Roswell Incident, a secular nation looks increasingly for solace from out there somewhere

AMY HARMON
New York Times

ROSWELL, N.M. — Squint hard enough against the bright desert sun, true believers say, and you cannot help but make it out — the burn where the spaceship crashed against the red-streaked rock, the dent like a giant heel print that it left in the bluff, the protrusion off to the right where military policemen found the alien holding a small black box on that fateful July morning in 1947.

Hub Corn, whose sheep ranch happens to contain the site of the most momentous event in the hazy history of flying saucers, charges \$15 for a viewing. But he doesn't give his visitors the hard sell. He doesn't have to.

"When I first started doing this I was afraid in my own mind that people weren't really getting what they wanted," Corn said. "I felt like everybody that come out would want to see a spacecraft, or at least some material. But people seem happy just to be here. They seem happy to believe."

Or at least *willing* to believe. Fifty years after what has become known in ufology circles as the Roswell Incident, America's fascination with unidentified flying objects has never been more intense, or as widespread.

More than 100,000 sky-watchers and conspiracy enthusiasts are expected to attend the golden-anniversary celebration here during the first week of July.

Such summer merriment in the desert, where tem-



It costs \$15 to see the UFO "crash site" near Roswell, which is holding anniversary celebrations next month. AP

At least five alien-themed movies are scheduled for release in the next few months as producers hope to repeat the success of last summer's Independence Day, in which the U.S. military finally coughs up the Roswell alien just in time to save Earth from an invasion by the creature's angry relatives.

And Art Bell, whose syndicated late-night radio

But even as science relentlessly unravels life's greatest mysteries, it might be hard to dispel the popular belief in superior technological beings — whose very existence is beyond the means of our own scientists to verify or debunk. For some, aliens replace or augment conventional religious beliefs.

"One of the things that attracts me to this whole realm is that it's something that we don't know," said Katherine

legal assistant from Austin, Tex., who has made two pilgrimages to the UFO Museum and Research Centre here. "It might be like, if we're not the only ones, why do we live the way we do? Why do we have the kind of government we do?"

But the most persuasive evidence for many museum visitors are the statements in books and videos of Roswell residents and retired military employ-

A magnitude 5.2 earthquake rocked the same area of eastern Iran that was devastated by a more powerful temblor in May. The latest shaking damaged a number of homes in the area of Qaen and Birjand. Earth movements were also felt in New Zealand, central Chile, southwestern Mexico, northern, western and eastern parts of Japan, western British Columbia, the Aleutian Islands and around Yellowstone National Park in Wyoming.

French floods

Violent storms and flash flooding in northeastern France killed four people during a two-day rampage. The Normandy region was hardest hit, with mudslides and floods cutting off major highways and rail links. A 28-year-old woman and her two children were swept away by a mudslide near Rouen.

El Niño's return

U.S. scientists issued strong warnings about large-scale changes in the world's weather this year, caused by the return of the El Niño ocean warming in the Pacific. Australian farmers fear crop losses from the developing drought that usually accompanies the phenomenon. Ecuadorian authorities launched a disaster program in anticipation of the floods, mudslides and epidemics associated with El Niño.

Glacial threat

Massive floods threaten to sweep away 18 villages in eastern Nepal if further glacial melting pushes a dam to its bursting point. More than 7,000 residents near the Tsho-Rolpa glacial lake in the Rolwaling Valley have been evacuated to safer grounds. Engineers are also attempting to siphon some of the water and divert it to other areas to lessen the threat.

Speed feeding

Operators of illegal logging ventures in northern Thailand are feeding their elephants a potentially lethal diet of amphetamine-laced bananas in an effort to speed up work before the rainy season sets in. The Bangkok Post reported that veterinarians and local police in Lampang province know of the substance abuse by working pachyderms and their human keepers in the race to haul timber out of the province's Mae Rieng-Soi Yaeng forest reserve. Dr. Preecha Puangkham, a volunteer at Lampang's elephant hospital, said that since amphetamines were introduced to the elephants a few years ago, 10 animals had died of overwork and exhaustion. The hospital has also tried to treat some of the abandoned animals for amphetamine addiction.

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Such summer merriment in the desert, where temperatures can rise to 110 degrees, is testament to the emergence of a mainstream belief in UFOs. A recent Gallup Poll found that 42 per cent of American college graduates believe that flying saucers have visited Earth in some form. A Roper Centre survey two decades ago

found that 30 per cent of graduates believed in UFOs.

Thousands of Americans have reported being abducted by aliens in recent years. And John Mack, a psychiatry professor at Harvard Medical School who was subjected to a harsh review by the school in 1995 after publishing his view that many of these reports are true, is gaining adherents and will be a keynote speaker at the Roswell weekend.

Mack survived the review by his peers uncensored, and in August nearly 200 mental-health professionals are expected to attend a conference that he will convene to discuss alien abductions.

Attribute it to concern over the approaching millennium or anxiety over technology that advances faster than a layman can understand. Chalk it up to the public's suspicion of Washington.

Whatever the causes, the long-held tenets of the flying-saucer buffs — aliens are visiting us, and the government knows it and is covering it up — now permeate the public consciousness and the popular culture.

The hit television series *The X-Files* features two FBI agents looking into just such a coverup.



N.Y. Times News Service

to save Earth from an invasion by the creature's angry relatives.

And Art Bell, whose syndicated late-night radio show on UFOs once drew only the paranormal faithful, now consistently ranks as America's fourth most popular radio-talk-show host.

"There are millions of Americans who probably know more about aliens than they do about thermodynamics," said Benson Saler, a

Brandeis University anthropology professor and co-author, with Charles Ziegler, an anthropologist, of *UFO Crash at Roswell*, soon to be published by the Smithsonian Institution Press.

Saler sums up the common wisdom this way: "We know what they look like — they're tall and slender with huge heads and almond eyes. And the hope is that these beings with superior technology will enter into communion with us and help solve our problems."

The book maintains that the Roswell story has all the elements of a modern myth, serving as an expression of anti-government sentiment and the age-old yearning to believe we are not alone in the universe.

Scientists and skeptics have warned that the embrace of pseudoscientific ideas like alien visitation and abduction threatens to undermine the critical thinking by an educated public that a democratic society requires.

And critics point to the recent suicide of 39 members of the Heaven's Gate cult, who believed a spaceship travelling behind a comet would carry them to the "next level," as a tragic result of the blurring of science and science fiction.



Aliens are now a big tourist draw in Roswell, where the UFO Museum and Research Centre offers a model of a visitor.

For some, aliens replace or augment conventional religious beliefs.

"One of the things that attracts me to this whole realm is that it's something that we don't know," said Katherine Heenan, a 34-year-old doctoral candidate at the University of Connecticut, discussing on an Internet E-mail list her belief that aliens have probably visited Earth. "Technology changes so rapidly — the things we used to believe we no longer believe," she said. "I was raised to believe in God, but I don't believe what I was raised to believe in."

Like most legends, the Roswell tale traces its genesis to a real event. In early July 1947, a ranch foreman, W.W. Brazel, found strange, shiny material littering the ground near Roswell, in southeastern New Mexico. He turned the material over to the sheriff, who gave it to the military authorities at the air base here.

On July 8, what was then the army air force issued a press release about the landing of a "flying disk." This resulted in a headline in the local newspaper, the *Roswell Daily Record*, that said, *RAAF Captures Flying Saucer on Ranch in Roswell Region*.

Military officials recanted the next day, calling the debris merely a downed weather balloon. With that, the matter was largely forgotten until the early 1980s, when the first of more than a dozen books on the subject was published.

These versions of the Roswell story variously held that Brazel, who by then had died, was harassed into abetting what was said to be a government coverup; that the crippled craft crashed on what is now Corn's land, and that the military retrieved three to five alien bodies, which might now be stored in another stronghold of UFO lore, the Area 51 military installation in Nevada.

In 1994, aiming to defuse speculation about what happened at Roswell, the air force issued a 1,000-page report disclosing that what it had claimed was a weather balloon was in fact a classified experiment designed to detect nuclear tests conducted by the Soviet Union.

But for a suspicious populace — 71 per cent of Americans polled by Gallup say they believe the government knows more about UFOs than it lets on — the air force report did little to deter the coverup theorists.

"People would panic if they knew the truth," said Jill Headstream, 44, a

But the most persuasive evidence for many museum visitors are the statements in books and videos of Roswell residents and retired military employees who say they took part in the events as they unfolded.

Walter Haut, the public-relations officer at the Roswell base in 1947 and still resides in the same house where he lived when he wrote the famous news release, is a bit bemused by all the recent attention. "The 25th anniversary in 1972, nobody noticed," he said.

Haut, now 75, continues to argue that his original release was on the mark. "I think something extraterrestrial fell out of the sky and landed on a ranch north of Roswell in 1947," Haut said. "But I have to tell everyone that asks, none of my knowledge is first-hand."

In a recently released book, *The Day After Roswell* (Pocket Books, 1997), Philip J. Corso, who served on the National Security Council under President Dwight D. Eisenhower, contends that he personally directed an army project that transferred to the military various types of technology — including fibre-optics and a microchip — recovered from the alien ship that

crashed in the desert. America's interest in UFOs began at the dawn of the atomic age, when fears over the Cold War and anxieties about new doomsday technologies coincided with thousands of reported sightings in the years that followed the Roswell incident.

Aliens, the thinking went, must have figured out a better way — an assumption perhaps best expressed in the 1951 movie *The Day the Earth Stood Still*. In the film, a flying saucer lands in Washington and its pilot warns that unless the people of Earth learn to use atomic power for peaceful purposes, the planet — and even the galaxy — will be destroyed.

Of course, many of those publicizing and perpetuating the Roswell myth are also making money from it. That includes the city itself, which even before it caught the 50th-anniversary fever, had made a cottage industry of extraterrestrial refrigerator magnets and stuffed alien dolls. Motel-owners say about one-fourth of their bookings are alien-related.

"Do I believe it?" said New Mexico's tourism secretary, John Garcia, who was here early in June to help plan the July festivities. "Sure I believe it — all the way to the bank."

Scientists warn that the embrace of such pseudoscientific ideas will undermine the critical thinking a democracy requires.

A UFO weekend on TV

Can't get enough of UFOs? On its UFO Weekend, the Discovery Channel last night began running a four-part mini-series called *UFOs Down to Earth*.

The second part, tonight at 9, delves into allegations of alien crashes and

military coverups. Tomorrow night at 8, a nuclear physicist claims to have worked on alien spacecraft for the U.S. government.

At 9 p.m. tomorrow, a look at the 50th anniversary of modern-day UFO sightings.