



[SKEPTICAL INQUIREE BENJAMIN RADFORD

Benjamin Radford is a research fellow at the Committee for Skeptical Inquiry and author or coauthor of six books, including *Tracking the Chupacabra: The Vampire Beast in Fact, Fiction, and Folklore*.

Lessons from a Denver Fly



What's your take on the recent Denver UFO video? Any lessons for skeptics?

—R. Miller



An unusual video of mysterious dark objects moving very quickly and erratically over the skies of Denver, Colorado, caused a national stir in November

2012. An anonymous UFO buff showed KDVR Fox News reporter Heidi Hemmat home videos he had filmed from an open field during the past summer of “strange objects . . . nobody can explain.”

Robert Sheaffer is covering the subject in this issue, and interested readers should see his column for a detailed discussion. This case holds some interesting real-world lessons about skepticism, credulity, journalism, and UFO believers. I got involved in this case when I was asked by the Discovery Channel to research the case and write about it in a column for Discovery News (Radford 2012). The piece elicited interesting comments from readers.

Several complained that other skeptics and I had claimed to have solved the mystery without having done any investigation. In fact I never claimed to have investigated (or definitively solved) the Denver UFO video. Having had investigation experience with insects being mistaken for ghosts and UFOs, I merely provided some expert skeptical analysis and context to the claims, pointing out

the logical reasons why what was seen in the film was likely an insect instead of, for example, an extraterrestrial spacecraft.

Ask the Experts

One person asked me, “Any chance that a real scientist can get some real high speed footage of that thing? The cameras and lenses certainly are available, and it might actually be able to capture a clear image.” This sentiment was echoed by others, and seems like common sense. The problem is that, as a practical matter, few if any “real scientists” are eager to spend their time on this, especially those outside of Denver. Most probably have better things to do (such as holiday shopping, work, etc.) than to gather cameras, tripods, and other gear, locate the field in Denver, and videotape what are almost certainly insects. Preparing and executing this experiment could take several days of work for little benefit. It’s not that the scientific community is ignoring or dismissing it, as is often claimed.

Believers in paranormal phenomena often say things like, “Scientists should come investigate” a given UFO or Bigfoot or ghost sighting. *Which* working scientists, exactly, should take time off their jobs in cancer research, developing new energy technologies, or whatever

important jobs they’re doing, to spend an unpaid afternoon in a cold, empty field waiting for an insect to fly by? Of course if a scientist wants to conduct such an experiment or investigation, their participation would be welcome and useful. Suggesting that scientists should look into these sorts of mysteries is a great idea in theory, but in the real world most working scientists cannot simply take a day or more off work to investigate a UFO video—especially in cases like this where the explanation is pretty clear to everyone except UFO believers and TV reporters.

This is where skeptical investigation comes in—almost always by non-scientists such as Joe Nickell, Robert Sheaffer, Jim Underdown, me, and others. Understanding critical thinking and how science works is far less important than having an advanced degree in science or being a working scientist.

Recreating the Video

This raises a second investigative question: What is the value in a scientist or skeptical investigator going to the site with cameras? The videos had been shot months earlier, and by the time the story aired many of the bugs and insects were no longer active in Denver. There’s little point in trying to replicate a video unless you can do it under identical (or

very similar) conditions. The context and environment at play on a summer afternoon is not the same as it would be on a winter night. In any event, dozens of locals—as well as several Denver-area skeptics, including those from the Rocky Mountain Paranormal Society—visited the field and noted the presence of bugs (and lack of UFOs) in the area.

There's no harm done in trying to recreate the original videos, but it's unlikely that the result—no matter how closely replicated—will satisfy the believers. Even if an investigator provided an iron-clad case with multiple cameras, many UFO buffs would simply find reasons to claim that the videos are different than the originals—perhaps the “UFOs” moved slightly faster or slightly slower, or were a different color, etc. Such is the desire to believe. In fact, there are already several existing videos showing what flying insects look like; you can find links and video at Robert Sheaffer's *Bad UFOs* blog.

Another problem with this suggestion is that it has the burden of proof exactly backward: It is not up to skeptics or scientists to prove that the UFO is likely an insect; it's up to those who claim that the image is of an unknown entity to prove that it's not an insect. There are times when an investigator will voluntarily assume the burden of proof (I did it in my examination of the “best case for psychic detectives”; see “The Psychic and the Serial Killer,” *SI*, March/April 2010). But it's a slippery slope, and it's important for skeptics to make clear to both the public and UFO claimants where exactly the burden of proof lies. The default explanation is a naturalistic one—in this case likely a bug—not a supernatural or extraordinary one; it's not a spaceship until proven otherwise by camera-savvy scientists and skeptics.

Alternative Explanations

This case also illustrates an important issue in skeptical investigation: In order to get the right answers you have to ask the right questions. Heidi Hemmat, the reporter, made several investigative errors, including not considering alterna-

tive explanations. How you understand and approach a mystery dictates how you will investigate it. The reporter accepted the UFO buff's interpretation of the flying objects as being large and high above the city, so that's how the mystery was framed, and that guided the questions asked. On the other hand, if Hemmat had simply taken the footage at face value (there are dark, out-of-focus objects moving quickly at an unknown distance from the camera) that might have guided her to other explanations and experts.

Anomalous experiences and photographs—indeed all evidence—does not arrive in the investigator's hands pure. Instead, the evidence arrives freighted with opinions and interpretations from eyewitnesses, researchers, and others. These interpretations of the evidence may turn out to be completely correct, completely wrong, or somewhere in between. Because those opinions are often formed by little more than subjective opinion, desire to believe, credulity, or any number of other factors, it is important for an investigator to start fresh, stripping away the second-hand interpretations and assumptions, and begin with a blank slate. The evidence should be taken at face value to start, and each assumption should be checked for validity before being accepted. In essence, much of investigation is merely deconstructing a theory to see if all the pieces of information really fit or make sense when assembled in a different way.

Several readers complained that I and other skeptics had presented the fly explanation as definitive; one wrote, “It is doubtful that Radford's insect explanation is as certain as he maintains.” In fact, in presenting the skeptical viewpoint, I was careful to not go beyond the evidence, and qualified the explanation as *likely*—not certain. This was clear from the headline (“Denver UFO Likely Has Earthly Explanation”) as well as the text (“The most likely explanation? A bug or insect, probably a fly or bee.”).

Ironically, the only certainty expressed by anyone involved in the story was by the aviation expert, Steve Cowell, that KDVR put on the air, who categorically stated what the objects absolutely could

not be: “That is not an airplane, that is not a helicopter, those are not birds,” he said. In an on-air voice-over, Hemmat also stated that Cowell was certain the objects were not bugs.

Thus, contrary to the popular view of skeptical debunkers closed-mindedly dismissing the alien spacecraft theory out of hand as ridiculous and impossible, skeptics merely employed the principle of Occam's razor to the circumstances of the video and offered a plausible alternative explanation. It was instead the UFO promoters and their experts who dismissed the most likely theory out of hand, saying that bugs absolutely could not explain the video images.

So who's being more open-minded: the skeptics who aren't ruling anything out as impossible but are merely presenting a likely alternative explanation that fits the facts, or the UFO believers who immediately conclude that bugs could not possibly be mistaken for the images and therefore must be something unknown or mysterious?¹ (See also Petrovic's Forum, p. 53.)

Some criticized Hemmat and KDVR for incompetence and ratings-grabbing, and while that may be partly true, it's easy for skeptics to forget that the general public (which, apparently, includes TV reporters) does not have a good grasp of basic investigation techniques. This is why skeptical investigation is so important. ■

Note

1. Some UFO believers rather disingenuously claimed that nobody mentioned in the KDVR report had claimed or implied that the UFOs were alien spacecraft, but merely “unidentified flying objects.” This is not only factually wrong (if the suggestion was not that the anomalies were aircraft or spacecraft, why were they said to be “taking off and landing” in a specific part of town?) but also nonsensical: if all that's being claimed is that they are unidentified, then why the backlash against skeptics offering a logical explanation for the UFO?

References

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