



The northern lights are a huge draw for many visitors to the territory, creating astral light shows that seem straight out of a science-fiction movie.



WHAT'S GOING ON UP THERE?

The Yukon's dark nights and wide-open spaces are known to offer up great views of stars and planets. But, as our reporter found out, some sky-gazers are seeing more than they bargained for.

|| By Jerome Stuart ||

The Yukon is known for its northern lights, with many visitors from around the world arriving to see the aurora borealis put on an unforgettable show. On a clear evening there are breathtaking views of the aurora, backdropped by a beautiful blanket of seemingly endless stars.

But there are other lights and perhaps other visitors, too. For years, there have been reports of unexplainable happenings in the sky, many of which have caught the attention of local and international UFO researchers. To some, the Yukon is not just a place to go sky-gazing, but a hotspot of UFO activity.

As a science-fiction writer, I'm normally skeptical about extraterrestrials and UFO sightings—I like my aliens in movies and books. I've lived five years in the Yukon and haven't seen something I couldn't explain. Nonetheless, if the Yukon is such a source for sightings, I wondered how many people had actually seen a UFO.

I started asking people about their own experiences, and, surprisingly, nearly four out of five people I asked had seen something in the sky they couldn't explain. While most weren't ready to pin that to a visitor from another planet, they were convinced it wasn't something "normal." And they weren't shy talking about it either.

I recently attended a reception for a friend who'd received a public-service award. While fighting over chips and cream puffs with a typical Canadian family, the Scholzes, I asked them if they'd ever seen a UFO.

They had. Paul and Kerri Scholz, along with their kids, Cassell and Hannah, saw something fly over, and around, Haeckel Hill, just outside of Whitehorse.

"It was lower than a plane and went around it," said Kerri. Three of the family likened the movement to "jumping over the hill."

Kerri had a similar experience in Yellowknife.

"The ship darted back and forth, very quickly, and then flew off. None of our planes do that," she explained.

At another party, this one for New Year's Eve, I casually brought up the UFO question in the kitchen. Three members of the host family, the father and two sons, described how they'd experienced a sighting together.

"We were driving along, and we noticed a bright lamplight up Haeckel Hill, like it was daylight—a giant triangle of light—from something close to the hill, hovering over it," said Florian Lemphers, a retired assistant deputy minister for the Yukon government.



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The trio couldn't see any ship or recognizable aircraft. They just watched the light for a moment, and then it was gone.

Lemphers' two sons, John and Justin, recounted a separate story of watching a disc in broad daylight pass by the sun. "I thought it was the moon at first," said John. Justin chimed in, "But I said the moon wasn't over there. We both looked up and the disc passed the sun and shot out of sight."

Justin had several UFO sightings. But for at least one of them he found a plausible explanation.

"I called the airport, but there was no one in the tower at night. And I called the RCMP, and they were very kind. 'There's nothing we can do,' they said. But they filled out a report [and] asked me if I minded having my name attached," says Justin. "When it came out, people phoned me up, wanting to tell me their UFO stories. They said, 'I don't want to report mine. I just want to talk to someone who's seen it, too.'"

"A year later, I find out, by doing some research, that it was a NOSS satellite," he explains, referring to Naval Ocean Surveillance System satellite formations, which are often reported as UFOs.

Justin's not convinced all sightings are satellites, however. Only that on this one occasion it was.

"Sometimes it's just unidentified," said Paul Heard, another party guest. People like Heard are willing to believe that sightings can be attributed to weather balloons, spy satellites, a new American plane—anything more likely than a visitor from another planet.

While he too witnessed strange lights, Heard seemed unwilling to delve into the mystery of the event.

"If it doesn't come near me, it doesn't bother me. It's over there—it's okay." He waved the memory away.

How do you verify a story that sounds implausible? How do you measure the truthfulness of an eyewitness? Most of us will first check to see if the person is sane—then sober. Lastly, you start hoping they're joking with

you. After you've checked all those things, you might start to believe.

Martin Jasek, a UFO researcher and the Yukon representative for B.C.-based organization UFO*BC, has something he always looks for when he's conducting UFO inquiries. "If the person you're talking to relives that moment with you—traces the pattern of where they were looking, has facts of where they were, and is in the moment—more than likely they are telling the truth."

Jasek moved to Delta, B.C. in 2001, but the amateur ufologist still gets calls from Yukoners who've observed something in the night sky they can't explain.

"If they tell you every detail on a three-hour phone call—you know they saw something," said Jasek. It's that sense of emotional trauma from the person that convinces him.

While his day job is working as a water-resource engineer for a major B.C. utility company, Jasek has been in the business of verification and research of UFO sightings since 1997, after reading about the Yukon's most infamous reported UFO encounter, the Pelly-Carmacks sighting in 1996.

"That's been ranked as one of the top-ten sightings in the world—of all time," he told me on the phone.

The Pelly-Carmacks sighting marked a turning point for Jasek. He'd grown up fascinated by space, but it wasn't until he read an article in the local paper that he started to take UFOs seriously. The article quoted several witnesses, who gave detailed accounts of a huge ship that travelled from Fox Lake to Pelly Crossing, passing witnesses in Carmacks, Braeburn, and on the road between.

"The internet was just getting going in 1997," explained Jasek. "I started reading of sightings all over the world. And then we had this recent sighting in my own neighbourhood."

He did what many who are curious about UFOs do: he started asking around, and he realized how prevalent UFO sightings were in the Yukon. Furthermore, he noticed how people wanted to talk to someone who'd believe their story. That handful of testimonies from the newspaper article



Jean Van Bibber, of Pelly Crossing, is one of 32 Yukoners who reported seeing a UFO over Fox Lake and the villages of Pelly and Carmacks on Dec. 11, 1996. Van Bibber talks candidly about her experience in *It Came From Heaven*, a 1997 documentary about the sighting.

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on the Pelly-Carmacks event turned into 32 eyewitness accounts over the next several years.

Some of them, reluctant, told Jasek, “This is the first time I’ve told anyone of this.”

Many wanted to remain anonymous when faced with a one-on-one interview. The stigma facing someone who reports seeing a UFO was still strong, and, indeed, it remains so today in some circles.

However, the increasing availability of the Internet created an opportunity for dialogue—it was a place where people could share their experiences and ask questions without fear of being ostracized. Jasek created a website, *ufobc.calyukon*, exclusively for Yukon UFO sightings, and people

started to come there and record what they saw.

“For the witnesses, the website was a great relief. For the researcher, it was a valuable tool,” said Jasek.

The site documents over 250 sightings, “some more dramatic than others,” Jasek noted.

In an effort to rule out mundane explanations—aircrafts, stars, planets, comets, or satellites—Jasek uses a computer program to recreate the night sky as it was on the date in question. He calls

the airport, but notes that “most people are aware of conventional aircraft.”

For the veteran researcher, there are some dead giveaways in an eye-witness account that rule out standard aircraft, he said. “If it’s disc shaped or hovering and suddenly reverses direction or takes a 90-degree-angle sudden turn—yeah, that’s not one of ours.”

After recording numerous anecdotes from friends and acquaintances on their close encounters with the unknown, I found myself envious, disappointed not to have seen a UFO myself. But from the reports on Jasek’s website, most of the sightings happened between Lake Laberge and Pelly

Crossing, and, furthermore, you had to be out at night and you had to be looking.

So, science-fiction enthusiast that I am, I was off to Pelly Crossing in -40°C weather—to interview one of the 32 people who testified to the big sighting in 1996.

As one of the more forthcoming witnesses of the Pelly-Carmacks event, Jean Van Bibber spoke extensively about her experience in the 1997 documentary, *It Came From Heaven*, (produced by Gloria Adamson, aired on the Aboriginal Peoples Television Network, and now widely available on the Internet). Luckily, she was more than willing to talk again.

Van Bibber recalled that after the sighting CBC produced a small news report on the event. Just as quickly came a riposte from the University of Victoria, claiming what everyone saw was a slow break up of a meteor through the atmosphere.

“Let me draw you what I saw,” she said, taking my notebook. She drew for a few minutes, while her husband, Graham, prepared spaghetti in the kitchen. She handed it back to me. “I don’t think a meteor has elevator shafts,” she said, indicating a vertical stretch of lighting that was solid and pulsing. She also pointed out four rows of stacked lights.

Besides, she said, Whitehorse had seen a meteor breakup in the atmosphere, on Jan. 18, 2000, so they knew the difference. That event caused a huge thunderclap, a blinding light over the city, and a plumed ball that roared across the sky.

“This thing didn’t make a sound,” Van Bibber said.

Her husband didn’t believe her when he came home. “She was flapping her arms trying to tell me about it,” he said. Van Bibber’s descriptions didn’t convince him until he went into town the next day and met up with a friend, John Tom-Tom, who’d seen it, too. “He’s a real straight arrow,” Graham said.

“Did you tell someone?” I asked her.

She leaned across the table, very serious. “Who would you tell?”

The road from Whitehorse to Pelly Crossing is a lonely stretch. When it’s pitch dark, with no moonlight, there’s only you and your lights for three hours. Anything flying by would be obvious.

I saw nothing on my trip.



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Justin Lemphers, a founding member of the Yukon UFO Society, claims there are more sightings outside Whitehorse—and more sightings per capita for the Yukon than anywhere else in the world—for some obvious reasons. “Lots of bush cabins and residences out on the lakes. People are more active out here, so they’re outside and probably looking up more often. And there’s less light pollution than Whitehorse, too.”

Most of his own sightings happened when he lived out on Shallow Bay Road, next to Lake Laberge, and he hasn’t seen anything since he moved to Whitehorse.

Martin Jasek helped organize a UFO conference in Whitehorse, in 2000, where Justin heard some amazing eyewitness accounts. “It was standing room only in the Westmark,” he said, “and we had the whole ballroom for the conference. Everyone was coming forward and talking. We knew we had to do something for all these people.”

Justin and a few others banded together and formed the Yukon UFO Society, and they paid for a hotline so people could report their sightings. “We went back and forth, pitching in our own money to pay for the number.”

The hotline gave Jasek approximately 20–25 sightings a year, with 5–10 backdated sightings from folks who now had the courage to come forward and talk—at least to a hotline.

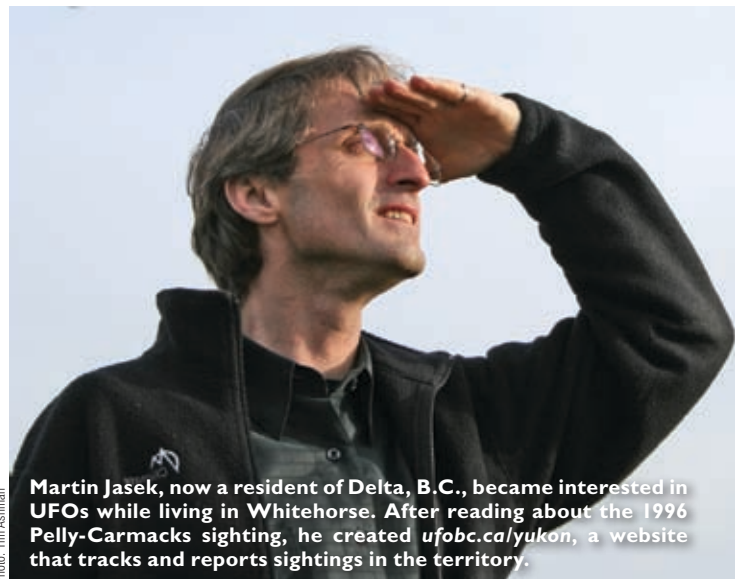


Photo: Tim Ashman

Martin Jasek, now a resident of Delta, B.C., became interested in UFOs while living in Whitehorse. After reading about the 1996 Pelly-Carmacks sighting, he created ufobc.ca/yukon, a website that tracks and reports sightings in the territory.

UFO research in the Yukon had been maintained seriously for 13 years, but times are different now. Founding members of the society have passed away, and still more have moved out of the territory. Jasek left for B.C. nine years ago, though he’s still willing to work on new sightings if they come his way. There were more sightings recorded when he lived in the territory, and there’s been



Photo: www.matu-keggelhoff.com

Lenticular Clouds

Keep Your Eyes on the Skies

Common explanations for unusual sightings

Naval Ocean Surveillance System (NOSS) satellite:

Often clustered in groups of two or three, the satellites track radio transmissions from ships at sea. Used by the U.S. Navy to track Soviet fleets during the Cold War, NOSS satellites travel in low orbit (anywhere from 160–2,000 km above Earth’s surface), making them occasionally visible to the naked eye, especially in the northern hemisphere.

Weather Balloons: Sent up daily from a launch pad close to the Canada Games Centre in Whitehorse, at the Environment Canada station, these high-altitude balloons carry equipment that measures humidity, temperature, dew point, wind levels, and atmospheric pressure.

Lenticular Clouds: Shaped like lenses, round or oval, these high-altitude cloud formations are usually perpendicular to

the wind and indicate extremely moist air is sitting under a shearing, jet-fast wind. These clouds can often appear as a disc.

Bright Planets: Venus, Jupiter, and occasionally Mars are often seen in the sky.

Aurora Borealis: No one could mistake this for a UFO, but it sure is nice to see and rare and sudden enough to fill your need for a sighting of something weird in the night. Aurora can be unpredictable colours and shapes, and last from a few seconds to several minutes.

Meteors: Whitehorse residents, on January 18, 2000, had an encounter with a giant meteor as it flashed through the early morning sky and roared over the city. While a meteor sighting of that nature is not at all a common occurrence, the Yukon’s clear skies often permit great views of meteor showers.

International Space Station: The first module of this international research station was launched in 1998, with in-orbit construction commencing shortly thereafter. Scheduled to be completed in 2011, this manned vessel is used to conduct research on geology, biology, astronomy, physics, and more. Because the station flies in low orbit, it is often visible from Earth.

By Jerome Stueart and Editorial Staff, with additional information from nasa.gov and Environment Canada.

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a noticeable decline since Yukoners no longer had a person close by they could talk to.

“It helps to have a person living there,” he said. A contact person could follow up on a sighting right away, could take measurements, estimate size, and corroborate the stories.

Jasek has returned to the Yukon twice, in 2002 and 2007, to speak with folks hoping to bend the ear of someone who’ll take them seriously. But, since Jasek’s departure, the reporting hotline was disconnected, along with the classified ads in the Yukon News that advertised the UFO Society’s meetings, leaving witnesses without a way to connect with each other.

Despite the society’s shrinking resources, Jasek is confident people still want to discuss their experiences. After all, he says, if it wasn’t for an anonymous caller, the big Pelly-Carmacks sighting wouldn’t have been recorded or researched.

Jean Van Bibber called me one day, telling me there’d been a sighting in Old Crow—a hovering craft that set the tops of trees on fire. She asked for Jasek’s number.

You might find Yukoners willing to talking about UFOs and UFO research, but they’re casual about it and not inclined to get carried away. There’s still something of a stigma around speaking out and depending on who

you talk to, there’s still no “conclusive evidence” that UFOs—the spacecraft of visitors from other planets—exist at all. Just as easily as you might find a believer, you also might find someone who’ll laugh in your face.

As for myself, I got so casual about asking the UFO question, that I walked into Whitehorse’s Baked Café on a Sunday afternoon, raised my hands and my voice, and called out: “I’m just curious. How many of you have seen a UFO in the Yukon?” I asked for a show of hands.

Radio silence. No hands.

Then, furtively, two hands went up, and a man told me he’d been staying with people who’d all reported seeing a UFO. But out of the 16 people present in the café, I’d assumed there’d be more hands raised.

Then I realized I was still wearing my Star Trek ball cap.

“Who’s gonna take you seriously with that on?” a barista joked.

More importantly, I thought, taking off the hat, those two people needed to believe someone would take them seriously, too. **Y**



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