

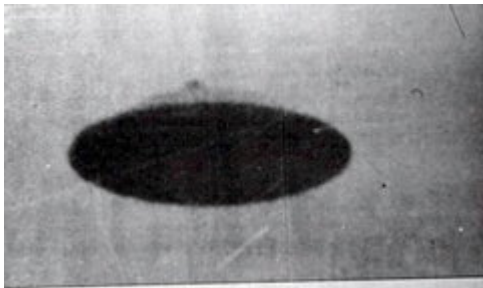
Living

The truth is still out there for the alien adherents attending this weekend's UFO Festival in McMinnville

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By Special to The Oregonian



[View full size](#)This is one of the photos taken by the Trents in McMinnville in 1950.

Have you seen a UFO in Oregon? If you have, you're not alone.

Ed Conroy, a retired environmental test lab scientist and U.S. Air Force veteran, has twice had close encounters that he can't explain.

About 20 years ago, Conroy was on U.S. 26 near Sylvan when he spotted what he thought was a meteor.

"This one came in just like a normal meteor. Then it slowed down, turned red, made an S-turn and went over behind a hill," Conroy says with a laugh.

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He tried rationalizing what he saw, figuring the meteor had burned itself to red dust and scattered on the wind.

"Then the next day I went to work and this lady is telling me about her son and his friends who were up in the West Hills watching UFOs come in."

Conroy's second sighting occurred just north of Lake Oswego as he, his wife and several friends drove home from dinner.

UFO Festival

When:

Friday and Saturday

Where:

Downtown McMinnville and McMenamins Hotel Oregon in McMinnville

Parades:

The UFO costume parade, along Third Street, is at 1 p.m.; the pet costume parade starts around 2 p.m.

Tickets:

Required for speaker events at the McMinnville Community Center: \$10 for one event, \$15 for two events, \$25 for all three

Online:

www.ufofest.com

For more on UFOs:

Mutual UFO Network (

www.mufon.com

), Oregon chapter (

www.oregonmufon.com

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"I saw this big, glowing, pulsating object lift off the ground." He thought it was a hot air balloon, then considered the night's frigid temperatures and high winds.

"Nobody I know that's sane would ever launch a balloon in that kind of weather," he says. "We watched it rise up into the air, and then it disappeared into the clouds."

As they drove across the Sellwood bridge, Conroy spotted a "triangle-shaped thing" in the sky to the south. Back at home, Conroy saw "a couple of helicopters come screaming into that area, like they were looking for something."

Oregon is filled with stories of hovering black triangles and silvery dots zipping across the sky. One of the most famous cases dates to 1950 in McMinnville, when Paul Trent and his wife, Evelyn, captured photos of a strange object over their farm.

"These days, there's Photoshop and all kinds of things (to doctor photos), but back then there weren't," says Renee Rank, marketing director for McMenamins, which has hosted the UFO Festival in McMinnville each May since 2000 to commemorate the Trents' photos.

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"They really are an example of a standard that's held pretty high in the UFO world," Rank says.

What is a UFO?

"UFO does not mean spacecraft from somewhere else. It means unidentified flying object, purely and simply," says Tom Bowden, Oregon state director for the Mutual UFO Network, which has chapters across the U.S. and in other countries to investigate UFO reports.

"It just means some kind of object that someone saw, and we cannot explain what they saw in conventional terms," he says. "It's not a planet, not a satellite, not a

saw in conventional terms," he says. "It's not a planet, not a satellite, not a conventional aircraft. We whittle away the possibilities until we come down to the answer being unidentified flying object."

Oregon MUFON gets about 100 reports per year, though usually a third of these sightings can be easily explained.

Being under cloud cover most of the year, Portlanders aren't used to viewing the night sky. What looks like UFO activity is often a natural or man-made phenomenon -- like routine docking maneuvers of the International Space Station.

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Bowden tells of a woman with a Ph.D. who reported seeing a "really bright light" night after night in the western sky.

"It turned out to be the planet Venus," Bowden says. "Obviously, her Ph.D. was not in astronomy."

Bowden estimates another third of the reports are eliminated due to insufficient data. But 20 to 30 cases investigated each year by Oregon MUFON, he says, "come out to be real UFOs."

Colonel Jeffrey Silver, Operations Group Commander for the Air National Guard's

[142nd Fighter Wing](#)

, isn't convinced.

"I've spent 25 years flying regularly, and I've never seen anything I couldn't explain," he says. There have been times where he's been fooled by refracting light or other conditions that can play visual tricks, but he's always been able to find a manmade or natural cause later.

He believes the same explanations may hold true for UFO sightings.

But if you see strange lights in the sky, who do you call? The Oregon State Police are stumped by this question and suggest that most people probably call 9-1-1.

But in Deneen Hayward's 25 years with the Portland 9-1-1 center, she doesn't recall a single instance of someone calling to report a UFO.

"If it's something that they just see in the sky that's moving around, it's probably not a 9-1-1 call," says Hayward, assistant operations manager of the center. "There's not going to be anything we're going to be able to do about it. We don't have officers in planes to go and take a look at it."

Hayward suggests contacting local airport towers, or even

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-- because they have big telescopes monitoring the skies.

"I don't think most law enforcement agencies are going to be particularly responsive," says Washington State MUFON director James Clarkson, who previously served 20 years with the Aberdeen, Wash., Police Department. "It isn't even necessarily a credibility issue. The police are really not set up to handle those types of reports."

Instead, Clarkson and Bowden recommend contacting MUFON or the National UFO Reporting Center to report possible sightings.





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Ross William

Hamilton/The Oregonian
parade in McMinnville on Saturday.

Along with serious discussions of UFOs, there will be the decidedly less serious UFO costume

Clarkson, author of

["Tell My Story: June Crain, the Air Force & UFOs."](#)

will speak at the McMennamins event this weekend, along with crop circle expert

[Colin Andrews](#)

and Travis Watson, who says he was abducted and wrote about the experience in the book

["Fire in the Sky."](#)

"The ultimate question is, 'Are we alone?' The answer -- in my mind and the minds of many other researchers in this field -- is no, we are not," says Clarkson. "The next question is, 'Have we been contacted?'"

Last month on the Discovery Channel's

["Into the Universe."](#)

astrophysicist Stephen Hawking warned that extraterrestrial visitors -- likely advanced far beyond our technology -- shouldn't warrant a warm welcome.

"If aliens visit us, the outcome would be much as when Columbus landed in America, which didn't turn out well for the Native Americans," he said on the program.

"It's not a matter of, as Stephen Hawking said, if they come. They are here," says researcher Andrews, who will speak about crop circles, UFOs and consciousness at the McMinnville event. "Whatever those objects are, they are here. They're reported everyday throughout the world. It's time to embrace the fact."

Those who keep an open mind, Andrews says, will be better prepared to accept new concepts moving forward

concepts moving forward.

"As we inch ourselves from the old sciences into the new, we become much more aware that there's a lot more here than we ever imagined," Andrews says.

"Consciousness has a spectrum beyond which we don't often feel comfortable. I've certainly got evidence that something that I can't account for has occurred."

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Rank says several thousand people each year attend the UFO Festival -- for the parade, the alien pet costume contest, guest speakers and free live music -- and they run the gamut from believers to skeptics to families just wanting to have a good time.

"There's always somebody that doesn't believe and maybe tries to state their point. It's certainly freedom of speech," Rank says. "But there's a lot of people there that absolutely believe that this is true. And there's a lot of people who think, why not? Leave your mind open. Why couldn't it be true?"

All the speakers have the same goal for the festival -- to encourage people to ask questions, take a hard look at the evidence and make up their own minds.

"Skepticism is a great thing," Andrews says. "We must have rational, down-to-earth consideration of our facts."

Even with his own sightings, Conroy hasn't come to a conclusion about UFOs.

"These are either unknown aerial phenomenon, or alien visitors," he says. "I'm not 100-percent sure these things are alien. I'm just thinking there's a possibility."

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Jennifer Willis

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