
Earth Mysteries

Mysteries surround us. You don't have to go to some remote or not easily accessible place on our planet to experience anything from the merely unusual to the positively perplexing. Strictly speaking, some of the things we examine in this section are not mysteries; they have been more or less explained. Still, such things as the Paluxy tracks, the Nazca lines, skyquakes, and wheels of light are undeniably odd. All of them have given rise to extravagant speculations that have become an inescapable part of the folklore of our time.

Other things – things whose existence seems hard to deny, though deniers have labored long to cast them into the outer darkness of respectability – defy just about any imaginable understanding of what is possible in the world. There may be no greater enigma on Earth than the entombment of animals within rocks. As a nineteenth-century observer put it, acceptance of such a phenomenon would render geology and biology “a mass of nonsense.” Hyperbole, surely. Yet it is true that neither of these eminently useful disciplines so far has done much to shed light on a recurring and well-documented riddle of nature.

Teleportation, if it could be proved to exist, would also present a profound challenge to our understanding of the world. The evidence for its occurrence, though thin and anecdotal, is just enough to hint at mind-boggling possibility while falling well short of giving solid evidence. Nonetheless, at the fringes, peculiar experiential claims about instantaneous transportation from one place to another are made – and are worth noting, at the least, for their curiosity value and perhaps for hinting at an unknown dimension of nature.

Anomalous Clouds

One pleasant summer morning in 1975, an Oyster Bay, New York, science teacher, Tom D'Ercole, was in his driveway about

to enter his car when he took a last glance up at the sky. There, hovering above the roof of his house, he saw a small dark cloud unlike the occasional cumulo­cirrus clouds that were floating by at a much higher altitude.

“The ‘cloud’ seemed to move and slightly enlarge as I watched it,” D’Ercole related. “This basketball-sized ‘cloud’ floated back and forth across the peak of the roof, changing in shape from a small globular mass to a larger ovoid and finally becoming an abstract, multicurved, dark, vaporous ‘something.’ It finally measured about six feet in height and 1 1/2 feet in width.”

Stunned and unable to think of a rational explanation, he continued to watch in disbelief as events took an even stranger turn. The cloud seemed to inhale, purse its “lips,” and direct a stream of water toward him and the car, soaking both. After a minute the spray stopped, and the cloud vanished instantly.

After changing his clothes, D’Ercole took his wet shirt to Garden City Junior High School, where he worked, and ran a pH test on it. The precipitation was simply water.

This event, which sounds like nature’s idea of a prank, may or may not be beyond current science’s ability to explain. Clouds *are* capable of peculiar appearance and behavior. In his *Tornados, Dark Days, Anomalous Precipitation, and Related Weather Phenomena* (1983), William R. Corliss culls from the scientific literature reports of cloud arches, luminous clouds, rumbling clouds, clouds with holes in them, and more. Though unusual, these are, no doubt, mostly or entirely of more interest to meteorologists than to those seeking evidence of truly inexplicable events in the atmosphere. This entry concerns the latter: instances of clouds so peculiar that some of them, in fact, may not have been clouds at all.

Falls from clouds

Falls from the sky of organic or inorganic materials are sometimes associated with unusual clouds.

One interesting case, reported in scientific journals of the period, concerned a small, slow-moving, perfectly spherical white cloud that suddenly appeared in an otherwise clear sky northwest of Agen, France, at 11 a.m. on September 5, 1814. Within a few minutes it stopped and remained motionless for a period of time, then abruptly sped southward, all the while revolving on its own axis and emitting ear-shattering rumbling noises. These climaxed with an explosion and the expulsion of a variety of stones, some of them of impressive dimensions. The cloud then ceased its movement and faded slowly away.

Comparable events are recorded at Sienna, Italy (1794), Chassigny, France (1815), Noblesville, Indiana (1823), and elsewhere.

In a letter published in a 1932 issue of *Science*, John Zeleny recalled a strange sight he had witnessed “on a clear summer night at Hutchinson, Minnesota, some 35 years ago.” A solitary, brightly luminous cumulus cloud “rose majestically from the eastern horizon,” he recalled, “shone with a uniform, steady, vivid,

whitish light and passed directly over the town. When the cloud was overhead a great shower of insects descended to earth covering the ground all around to the number of about 50 to 100 per square foot. These insects proved to be a species of hemiptera and were nonluminous."

That same summer (if Zeleny was correct in thinking the episode to have taken place in 1897) numerous small, blood-colored clouds filled the sky over Macerata, Italy. An hour later a storm broke, during which thousands of seeds fell. Unfamiliar to local people, they were eventually identified as being those of a kind of tree found only in central Africa and the Antilles.

Cigars in clouds

"Although I have studied the skies for many years," Charles Tilden Smith wrote in the British scientific journal *Nature*, "I have never seen anything like it before." "It" was two triangle-shaped shadows in the clouds. These dark patches maintained their stationary position even as the clouds rolled on. To all appearances, he said, each was a "heavy shadow cast upon a thin veil of clouds by some unseen object."

This sighting took place on April 8, 1912, at Chisbury, Wiltshire, England. After the commencement of the flying-saucer era thirty-five years later, it would have been noted in the UFO literature as yet another instance in which UFOs had hidden themselves in clouds. As early as 1919, in *The Book of the Damned*, anomalies chronicler Charles Fort was speculating, "If a large substantial mass, or super-construction, should enter this earth's atmosphere, it is our acceptance that it would sometimes . . . look like a cloud."

Fort's prescient remark anticipated a later phenomenon that would be dubbed the "cloud cigar." Cloud cigars figured in a number of UFO reports from the late 1940s (what may have been the first was reported in Toronto in November 1947) into the 1960s but, for some reason, few if any after that. Usually such objects were associated with smaller disc-shaped structures; thus cloud cigars were also known as "motherships."

Just before the onset of the great autumn 1954 UFO wave in France, several witnesses, among them a businessman, two police officers, and an Army engineer, recounted a spectacular observation of an extraordinary object over the town of Vernon. Businessman Bernard Miserey, who watched it from his driveway at 1 a.m. on August 23, described it as an enormous vertical cigar, 300 feet long, hovering above the north bank of the Seine River 1,000 feet away. According to his testimony, "Suddenly from the bottom of the cigar came an object like a horizontal disc, which dropped at first in free fall, then slowed, and suddenly swayed and dived horizontally across the river toward me, becoming very luminous" before vanishing in the southwest. Over the next forty-five minutes other similar discs dropped out of the cigar. By this time the mother craft had lost its luminosity and disappeared into the darkness.



These lenticular clouds over Santos, Brazil, resemble UFOs. (Courtesy Fortean Picture Library.)

Though no clouds are mentioned in connection with this sighting, it set the scene for an even more spectacular event. This one, with hundreds of witnesses, took place three weeks later on September 14, in the southwest of France along the Atlantic coast. At 5 p.m., while working with his men in a field, a wealthy farmer who lived near St.-Prouant saw a “regular shape something like a cigar or a carrot” drop rapidly out of a thick layer of clouds. The object, essentially horizontal though tipped slightly toward the Earth, was luminous and rigid, and its movements did not correlate with the clouds just above it. It looked, Georges Fortin said, like a “gigantic machine surrounded by mists.” It ceased its descent, then moved into a vertical position and became motionless.

By now citizens of half a dozen local villages, as well as farmers living in the region, were watching in awe. White smoke like a vapor trail began to pour out of the bottom of the object and head straight down before slowing and ascending to circle the cigar in ascending spirals. By the time it got to the top, the wind had



This cloud, photographed over Javea in eastern Spain, resembles a UFO and even seems to have an exhaust trail.

(Photo by Bob Askew, courtesy Fortean Picture Library.)

blown away all the smoke or vapor, revealing its source: a small metallic disc that shone like a mirror and reflected light from the larger object. The disc darted about the area, sometimes moving with great speed, sometimes stopping abruptly, before finally streaking toward the cigar and disappearing into its lower part.

“Perhaps a minute later, the ‘carrot’ leaned over as it began to move, accelerated, and disappeared into the clouds in the distance,” Fortin told investigators, “having resumed its original position, point forward. The whole thing had lasted about half an hour.” Other witnesses up and down the valley confirmed this account. Meteorologists confirmed that no tornado or other unusual meteorological activity was occurring at the time of the sighting.

A 300-foot-long, dull-gray, cigar-shaped machine emerged from a cloud during a rainstorm over Cressy, Tasmania, Australia, on October 4, 1960. Among those who saw it was the Rev. Lionel Browning, an Anglican minister and Tasman-

ian Secretary of the World Council of Churches. As he and his wife watched this extraordinary sight – they estimated the object to be four miles away and 300 feet off the ground – five or six domed discs, approximately thirty feet in diameter, shot out of the clouds just above and behind the cigar. They headed toward it “like flat stones skipping along water” – exactly how Kenneth Arnold described the motion of the discs he saw over Mount Rainier, Washington, on June 24, 1947, in the sighting that ushered in the UFO age.

“After several seconds the ship, accompanied by the saucers, reversed the way it came,” Browning reported. “It . . . was gone from sight after 30 seconds. . . . It appears the ship sailed on for some seconds unaware that it had shed its protection. Possibly when this was discovered, the saucers were called to the mother ship. The objects then moved back into the cover of the rain storm.”

UFO-like clouds

This incident, which took place on the Atlantic Ocean, off the coast of West Africa, south of Cape Verde, on March 22, 1870, is from the log of the barquentine *Lady of the Lake*:

At from 6.30 to 7 p.m. a curious-shaped cloud appeared in the S.S.E. quarter, first appearing distinct at about 25 degrees from the horizon, from where it moved steadily forward, or rather upward, to about 80 degrees, when it settled down bodily to the N.E. Its form was circular, with a semi-circle to the northern face near its center, and with four rays or arms extending from center to edge of circle. From the center to about six degrees beyond the circle was a fifth ray broader and more distinct than the others, with a curved end: – diameter of circle 11 degrees, and of semi-circle 2 1/2 degrees. The weather was fine, and the atmosphere remarkably clear, with the usual Trade sky. It was of a light grey color, and though distinctly defined in shape, the patches of cirro-cumulus at the back could be clearly seen through. It was very much lower than the other clouds; the shape was plainest seen when about 55 degrees to 60 degrees high. The wind at the time was N.N.E., so that it came up obliquely against the wind, and finally settled down right in the wind's eye; finally lost sight of it through darkness, about 30 degrees from the horizon at about 7.20 p.m. Its tail was very similar to that of a comet. The men forward saw it nearly 10 minutes before I [Capt. F. W. Banner] did, and came aft to tell me of it. . . . [I]ts general appearance was similar to that of a halo around the sun or moon.

A pair of clouds resembling “puffy-like daubs of cotton” passed in an eastward direction over Sunset, Utah, late on the afternoon of October 14, 1961. The clouds were linked by a cord of long, stringy material. Immediately behind them were two smooth, metallic, disc-shaped structures. All four objects disappeared over the horizon. The next day Ronald Miskin, an investigator for the Aerial Phenomena Research Organization, interviewed the witnesses. One was Sunset's mayor, who was pointing upward and illustrating the objects' trajectory when sud-

denly a "puffy" white object flew overhead, joined soon after by another, and the two proceeded to streak across the sky in the same direction as the objects of the previous day.

Aliens in clouds

Looking out the window of a cliff-top house along the seashore at Sydney, Australia, late one afternoon in the spring of 1965, a tourist noticed a beautiful stationary pink cloud. An hour later, when she looked again, the cloud was moving in her direction and soon was actually below her eye-level, enabling her to look down on it and see, to her amazement, a round, white object. Vents along the object's side emitted gray steam that, as it enveloped all but the top portion of the object, turned pink. The "cloud," in short, was an artificial creation.

As if this were not mind-boggling enough, an engine sound came from the still-descending object. A luminous ladder was lowered from the underside, and a humanlike figure climbed down to a lower rung. There he sat down and directed a searchlight toward the sea below. Some distance out on the water a pink flare shot into the air. Immediately the ladder retracted, and the object shot off in the direction of the flare. The witness then noticed a long but not clearly visible shape in the water from which the flare had ascended. Both the UFO and the underwater shape vanished in a "vivid pink flash."

On the afternoon of January 7, 1970, two Finnish ski enthusiasts reportedly encountered a mysterious luminous red "cloud" that, when it got within fifty feet of them, turned out to contain a smoke-spewing domed disc at its center. The object hovered near them, and in the light it cast, they could see a three-foot-tall humanoid with a waxy, pale face and a hooklike nose but no visible eyes. The creature was standing on the ground just under the UFO. After about twenty seconds the red fog reappeared suddenly, and by the time it dissipated, both the object and the being were gone.

These are not the only close encounters of the third kind in which "clouds" or "fogs" play a role, though these are infrequent features of such reports.

Phantom planes and vanishing clouds

A drought that began in 1973 and continued for well over a decade gave rise to a curious episode that, though its details are different, nonetheless is reminiscent in its effect of stories about "mad gassers." In other words, a person or persons unknown are said to be afflicting weird havoc on a community; yet the assailants' existence cannot be proved, and neither can their nonexistence.

In the early 1980s farmers in three southern Spanish provinces that drought had reduced to almost a desert landscape began charging that the absence of rainfall was not a sorry condition of nature but a sinister conspiracy. The principal, though not the only, suspects were big tomato growers who, small farmers asserted without discernible logic, did not want precipitation to fall on their crops. Farmers claimed, moreover, that the conspirators had hired pilots to destroy rain clouds.

Janet and Colin Bord

Janet and Colin Bord are two popular and respected authors of books on anomalies. Their works cover a range of subjects, from Britain's "Earth mysteries" to ghosts to cryptozoology to unidentified flying objects.

Janet Gregory (born May 4, 1945) met Colin Bord (born December 19, 1931) in 1969 at a UFO study group in London. They were married in 1971. According to Janet:

We found that our mutual interests also included what are now called 'earth mysteries': the study of prehistoric sites, folklore, 'earth energies'.... At that time Colin was earning a living as a photographer, and I was working as a freelance publisher's editor. It was from these compatible skills that our first book developed, Mysterious Britain.... It became quite successful in Britain, much to our surprise, and more books on earth mysteries followed, such as The Secret Country (on the folklore of prehistoric sites) and Earth Rites (on fertility practices in pre-industrial Britain).

We were traveling around Britain at this time, photographing prehistoric sites and gradually building up a sizeable collection of photographs, and another book resulted from this: A Guide to Ancient Sites in Britain. We also wrote more specialist books on subjects of particular interest to us: Sacred Waters dealt with the holy wells of Britain, and Mazes and Labyrinths of the World was a pictorial study of an ancient theme.

Their friend Bob Rickard, editor of the then-new *Fortean Times*, began giving them unusual photographs that came into his possession. With the pictures they themselves already had taken, the Bords developed the Fortean Picture Library, the world's major source for pictures of anomalous phenomena and related matters.

They wrote a trilogy of books on strange creatures, both zoological and paranormal: *Alien Animals* (1981), *The Bigfoot Casebook* (1982), and *The Evidence for Bigfoot and Other Man-Beasts* (1984).

"The late 1970s had also seen us move from our base," Janet says, "away from the noise and pollution of London to the relative peace of a small country

If there is a technology that can break up rain clouds, no meteorologist is aware of it. Despite repeated denials by atmospheric scientists, legal authorities, and aviation experts (who swore that small planes could not fly into storm clouds without serious risk of crashing), the farmers refused to back down. They said they

town on the border of Wales and England, Montgomery, which has a ruined castle perched on the rock above the town and rolling hills all around. Here we continued our writing, photography, and book-collecting, for we had by now amassed a sizeable number of volumes dealing with our fields of interest. By 1985 we realized we would have to move again, for the house was just not large enough to hold all our books, pictures, and files. So we moved into an old stone house in a more remote location on a hillside in North Wales, surrounded by fields of sheep.”



From their new base the Bords have continued their writing on the subjects that interest them. One recent book, *Life Beyond Planet Earth?* (1991), examines the spectrum of evidence and folklore concerning extraterrestrial life, from astronomers' searches to the stories of flying-saucer contactees.

Janet writes, "Our interest in 'mysteries and strange phenomena' encompasses all approaches. We aim to be totally open-minded, though not gullible. We refuse to be dogmatic about any phenomenon, for we know that mankind does not have all the answers and that there certainly are many mysteries which are little understood. Yet we try to maintain a commonsense approach to all mysteries, and we acknowledge that hoaxers are ever-present – perhaps even more active than most people realize. We have seen that some people become so immersed in the study of their chosen phenomenon that they cannot be objective, and cannot make the detached appraisal that is needed."

"We accept that science can explain the mechanisms behind some mysteries," she explains, "while at the same time many scientists apparently seem incapable of taking seriously some potentially important phenomena. But above all, after 20 years of intense interest in mysteries and strange phenomena, we retain our youthful curiosity about all the anomalous happenings which are reported, we retain our sense of humor when an intriguing mystery is shown to have a prosaic explanation, and we retain our intense interest in the human psyche, which after all is responsible for at least 50 percent of all mysteries – perhaps much nearer 100 percent, when one considers that *all* reports emanate from human beings."

had seen, on quite a number of occasions, the appearance of a thunderhead on the western horizon, followed within minutes by the approach of an unmarked aircraft. The aircraft would fly into the cloud, spew out chemicals, and reduce it to mere wisps.

Janet and Colin
Bord.
(Courtesy Fortean Picture
Library.)

A drought in southwestern France in 1986 produced identical claims. This time the villains were said to be corporate interests financing anti-hail seeding experiments. It did no good for the experts to retort that nothing can be done to prevent hail. Again some farmers insisted they had seen, or at least heard, the mysterious aircraft. The affair ended when heavy rain fell that summer.

Though social scientists laid the episode to mass hysteria, even some individuals not directly affected by the drought said they had seen the planes in action. One of them, Agriculture Ministry engineer Francisco Moreno Sastre, insisted, "It's not just the collective imagination." He told *Wall Street Journal* reporters that witnesses numbered in the "thousands." A priest, Father Manuel Prados Munoz of the mountain village of Maria, claimed repeated sightings, sometimes as many as a dozen a month. He said the planes would show up whenever his desktop barometer and his eyes indicated an imminent storm. After local people began to report their sightings to him, he learned of hundreds.

In cases such as these, no explanation really makes sense, and any speculation brought to bear on the episode is simply guesswork. No one suggested another possibility, for which no evidence whatever exists either, that a supersecret military or intelligence weather-control operation was responsible. One suspects that had these events occurred in the United States, where paranoia about such things is intense, this would have been the (non)explanation of choice. Fortunately for all concerned except those who wanted answers, the drought's passing put the mysterious planes, real or imagined, out of sight and soon out of mind.

Sources

- Banner, Frederick William. "Extract from Log of Barque 'Lady of the Lake.'" *Quarterly Journal of the Royal Meteorological Society* 1 (1873): 157.
- Bord, Janet. *Ghosts*. North Pomfret, VT: David and Charles, 1974.
- . Letter to Jerome Clark (March 2, 1992).
- Bord, Janet, and Colin Bord. *Mysterious Britain*. Garden City, NY: Doubleday and Company, 1973.
- . *Mazes and Labyrinths of the World*. New York: E. P. Dutton, 1976.
- . *The Secret Country: An Interpretation of the Folklore of Ancient Sites in the British Isles*. New York: Walker Publishing Company, 1976.
- . *A Guide to Ancient Sites in Britain*. London: Latimer New Dimensions, 1978.
- . *Are We Being Watched? True UFO Sightings by Children Around the World*. London: Angus and Robertson, 1980.
- . *Alien Animals: A Worldwide Investigation*. Harrisburg, PA: Stackpole Books, 1981.
- . *The Bigfoot Casebook*. Harrisburg, PA: Stackpole Books, 1982.
- . *Earth Rites: Fertility Practices in Pre-Industrial Britain*. London: Granada Publishing, 1982.
- . *The Evidence for Bigfoot and Other Man-Beasts*. Wellingborough, Northamptonshire, England: The Aquarian Press, 1985.
- . *Sacred Waters: Holy Wells and Water Lore in Britain and Ireland*. London: Granada Publishing, 1985.