



The Mysterious Phoenix Lights

Q: I heard about some strange lights over Phoenix that were sighted recently. I doubt they were aliens, but does anyone know what they were?

J. Griffith

A: Yes, in fact we do. On the evening of April 21, 2008, hundreds of residents in Phoenix, Arizona, called police and local news media to report four (some witnesses said five) bright, red lights hovering silently over the city. They changed position after a while, moving from a triangular to rectangular configuration, then disappeared one by one.

The Air Force claimed they had no aircraft in the area at the time and could shed no light on the mystery. According to FAA spokesman Ian Gregor, "We did receive a number of reports from people who said they saw red lights in the skies on Monday night. Among them were some air traffic controllers [at the Phoenix Deer Valley Airport]. However, there were no unusual targets or unidentified aircraft on our radar scopes. . . . We don't know where the lights came from" (Sunnucks 2008).

Theories abounded, with UFOs and aliens of course being very popular. Was it the beginning of an invasion? Should Earthlings begin searching for the book *How to Serve Man*?

The lights remained a mystery and became an international media story. The case took a twist two days later when a local television station aired a

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startling confession by an anonymous hoaxer: he had created the UFO lights using road flares tied to helium balloons, launching them at one-minute intervals. Some people were amused by the hoax, others were angered, and many conspiracy-minded UFO buffs were skeptical of the explanation.

It's true that just because a person has confessed to a hoax doesn't mean the case is solved. After all, people sometimes falsely confess to things they didn't do. A confession (especially an anonymous one) by itself is not credible unless corroborated by physical evidence. Let's analyze the facts of the case from a skeptical investigator's perspective.

1. The formation of the lights is consistent with independently moving objects, not fixed lights on an aircraft. They rose into the air together, stayed in more or less the same formation while in the same air currents, then drifted apart as they gained altitude. In fact, airport officials reported that "the lights were rising as they watched" (Associated Press 2008). Thus, the lights were sighted traveling vertically up into the air (as balloons do), instead of horizontally through the air (as aircraft do). Furthermore, when the lights did move horizontally, they drifted toward the east—the same direction as the wind.

2. Air traffic controllers reported that nothing showed up on their radar. If the lights were the only visible part of a metallic spaceship or airplane, they would have appeared on radar. However, "UFOs" consisting of small balloons, road flares, and some fishing line would be invisible to radar.

3. The way the lights disappeared also supports the hoax theory. They did not zoom away at high speed, as one might expect from an aircraft. Nor did they all suddenly and mysteriously disappear. Instead, eyewitnesses reported that the lights were visible for between fifteen and thirty minutes until they

disappeared one by one. This is exactly the pattern we would expect to see from flares that were lit (and launched) in sequence: they would go up, remain lit for about twenty minutes, then the first flare would extinguish. A minute or two later the second would burn out, and so on.

And, as a final nail in the coffin for the UFO buffs who really, really wanted the lights to be mysterious and unexplained

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4. One of the hoaxer's neighbors, a Mr. Mailo, actually watched the hoaxer launch the helium balloons and flares. Mailo said the flares were lit about 8 p.m., just before the UFO lights were first sighted.

That explains the mysterious 2008 Phoenix Lights. Any object seen in the sky, especially at night, can be very difficult to identify, and it's no wonder that the lights puzzled many people. All that is needed to create a UFO sighting is one person who may not recognize a light or object in the sky.

This is not the first time that strange lights have appeared in the dark skies over Phoenix. In 1997, similar lights were reported; the military had been dropping flares over a nearby testing range, although many UFO believers rejected that explanation as part of a cover-up. Not all UFO sightings are hoaxes—in fact most are simply misidentifications—but this case shows just how easy it is to fool the public and create a media stir.

References

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