



# The Mysterious Invisible 'Rods'

**Q:** I've been told there are small creatures called rods—which are shaped like, well, rods—that fly so fast they're invisible. Is there any truth to this? And where does such a claim come from?

—D. Phillips

**A:** Rods are a footnote in fortune-telling, a blip on the paranormal radar. What are they? It depends on who you talk to. Some believe they are extraterrestrial entities; others believe they are a species of unknown invisible animals. (One might think that animals, whether invisible or not, that zoom through the air at high speeds might have been noticed by now—if only because they would regularly collide with people and objects.)

Curiously—and very tellingly—rods almost invariably appear only in photographs, films, and videotapes. To an investigator, this is a big red flag suggesting that the phenomenon is a photographic artifact. In a nutshell, rods are to cryptozoology (or UFOs) what orbs are to ghosts.

The main proponent of the rod phenomenon is a man named Jose Escamilla,

who first “discovered” and publicized it in 1994. Escamilla's rods “allegedly zip through the air, never seeming to stop or slow down [and] have been seen almost everywhere that anyone has bothered to look for them. . . . The best way to spot them is to take a video or movie camera and point it at the sky. Sooner or later some little dark spot will be seen to zip across at high angular velocity, and when it does you will have a rod sighting” (Sheaffer 2000). So what might these mysterious, elongated, blurry “rods” caught on video be?

Bob DuHamel, editor of *AmSky*, an online amateur astronomy magazine, wrote a detailed analysis of Escamilla's “rods.” He began by noting a photographic phenomenon “so unremarkable as to be virtually ignored”—namely that fast-moving objects appear elongated in photographs. “When a blurred streak appears on a photograph most of us will see it as a fast moving object; Jose Escamilla sees [it] as an unidentified life form” (DuHamel 2000). Are the rods perhaps merely flying insects caught on film?

Doug Yanega, an entomologist at the University of California at Riverside, noted that a rod is “a videographic artifact based on the frame capture rate of the

videocam versus the wingbeat frequency of the insects. Essentially what you see is several wingbeat cycles of the insect on each frame of the video, creating the illusion of a rod with bulges along its length. The blurred body of the insect as it moves forward forms the rod, and the oscillation of the wings up and down form[s] the bulges. Anyone with a video camera can duplicate the effect, if you shoot enough footage of flying insects from the right distance” (quoted in Carroll 2003).

Still, Escamilla is undeterred. He has created a Web site featuring pictures of his rods and a documentary film about the subject. Escamilla's rods are a classic example of how “unexplained” phenomena often occur: someone notices something he thinks is odd or unexplainable and assumes that because he can't understand it, it must be novel or mysterious. □

## References

- Carroll, Robert. 2003. Rods. *The Skeptics Dictionary: A Collection of Strange Beliefs, Amusing Deceptions and Dangerous Delusions*. Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley and Sons.
- DuHamel, Bob. 2000. The 'rods' hoax. *AmSky*, February. Available online at [www.amsky.com/ufos/rods](http://www.amsky.com/ufos/rods).
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