Science & Technology

How Seriously Should We Take UFO Sightings?

Columbia alien hunter David Kipping on the odds of finding company in the cosmos.

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|
Jun. 17, 2026



Anton Petrus / Getty Images

On a recent Monday afternoon, Columbia astrophysicist David Kipping was strolling through the quiet streets of Tunbridge Wells, a town thirty miles southeast of London, when his phone rang. The caller was a journalist seeking his thoughts on the new Steven Spielberg film *Disclosure Day*. The sci-fi thriller, starring Emily Blunt

and Colin Firth, will serve for many viewers as a primer on modern UFO mythology, with flying saucers crashing down in the American Southwest, US military personnel swooping in to sequester the spaceships and their egg-headed crew members, and Men in Black–style agents fanning out to silence anyone with knowledge of the visitation. Kipping, a Cambridge-educated Brit who is spending the summer writing a book about the search for extraterrestrial life, let out an audible sigh when he heard the question. “I’m a bit disappointed it’s coming out,” he admitted. “I’m afraid it may hoodwink people, and lead them down the wrong path.”

UFO mania is at an all-time high in the United States today, eclipsing its previous peak in the 1950s, with surveys showing that nearly one-third of Americans believe that aliens have visited Earth. The topic blew up in 2017, when a former US intelligence official leaked videos of Navy pilots marveling at a variety of spherical and pill-shaped objects that appeared to zip past them at thousands of miles per hour and stop or turn on a dime. When Congress pressed for answers, the Pentagon acknowledged that it had been studying these and other spooky aerial phenomena for years, and that although it had no reason to think they were from outer space, it couldn’t explain them either.

“I found the Navy videos intriguing, as so many people did,” said Kipping, a prominent researcher in the search for extraterrestrial intelligence (SETI), a subfield of astronomy, and the host of the widely followed Cool Worlds podcast. “The fact that the government acknowledged their authenticity was certainly interesting.”

Of course, being unable to explain something we see in the sky doesn’t mean it’s Mork from Ork.

But even astronomers are prone to wishful thinking, according to Kipping, whose Columbia laboratory focuses on scanning distant solar systems for planets and moons that have suitable conditions for life. “We’ll spot something new in our telescopes, some weird stuff we’ve never seen before, and we’ll say, ‘Maybe it’s a sign of alien life!’ We’re human, and we get excited.”

He rattled off a list of near-misses that fellow astronomers have suffered in recent years: suspected signs of microbial activity on Venus (the presence of a telltale gas byproduct is now in doubt), hints of photosynthesis on the distant planet K2-18b (another flawed atmospheric analysis), and a possible alien spaceship entering our solar system (actually a cigar-shaped asteroid).

“When we see something that could be a sign of extraterrestrial life, it’s our job as scientists to rule out all other possibilities,” Kipping said. “Once we do that hard intellectual work, we usually find that there’s a simpler, much more likely explanation for what we’ve seen.”

The main obstacle in getting to the bottom of UFO sightings, Kipping said, is that high-quality data is often classified or otherwise unavailable. For example, the US government has not publicly released radar and other sensor data that would enable independent researchers to examine the circumstances of the Navy videos, which were recorded between 2004 and 2015. Skeptics have pointed out that optical illusions, perhaps caused by the pilots’ misjudging their distance from the objects, could explain at least some of those reports. Without rigorously exploring all reasonable explanations, though, the pilots’ stories, and all the tantalizing possibilities they seem to hold — *Alien spaceships that can bend space-time? New Russian or Chinese technologies capable of unimaginable feats?* — have lived on, neither confirmed nor decisively refuted. In other words, they’ve become classic UFO lore.

“It’s difficult to disprove that something is an alien spaceship based on a fuzzy video,” Kipping said.

The plot has thickened in recent years as a number of high-ranking government officials, including Secretary of State Marco Rubio and Congress members on both sides of the aisle, have pushed the US government to address long-standing conspiracy theories that it’s hiding alien spaceships and biological remains. The Pentagon, in a 2024 report, rebutted claims of cover-ups, saying the theories were groundless and based on hearsay. One detail that the Pentagon omitted from its report — but which the *Wall Street Journal* revealed in a series of articles coauthored by Aruna Viswanatha ’06JRN last year — is that its own internal investigation concluded that the US government had on numerous occasions dating back to the 1950s *spread* rumors that it was concealing information about aliens, as a smokescreen for its own top secret weapons programs. This included a disinformation campaign targeting the local population around Nevada’s infamous Area 51 Air Force facility when the military was developing the F-117 stealth fighter in the 1980s.

Some scientists are now trying to bring more methodological rigor to the study of UFOs, or UAP (for unidentified aerial phenomena), as the Pentagon now calls them.

Most notably, an international research consortium based at Harvard, the Galileo Project, has been raising private funds to create vast networks of satellites, telescopes, radar towers, and other sensors to capture high-resolution images of UFOs wherever they're reported.

Kipping isn't involved in that effort, as he suspects that if intelligent life exists elsewhere in the universe, it is hiding deep in the cosmos, not under our noses. "Astronomers are constantly looking up at the sky, and they've been doing so for hundreds of years," he said. "So, it would be kind of weird if vehicles had come down into our airspace unnoticed."

In the search for alien life, Kipping is playing the long game. Whereas some SETI researchers monitor the sky for radio transmissions or optical signals that might be beamed at us from afar, hoping for immediate proof of alien civilizations, he and his colleagues at Columbia's Cool Worlds Lab are analyzing data from major observatories, like the James Webb Space Telescope, to methodically map the contents and architectures of distant solar systems. For example, the Columbia scientists have described the orbital patterns that Earth-sized planets follow around the most common type of star, red dwarfs, and they have identified candidates for what may prove to be the first moons discovered outside our solar system. Their research has thus contributed to our basic understanding of astrophysics, even though the scientists' primary goal, as Kipping tells it, is to understand how unusual the conditions that bred life on Earth are and to identify those cosmic neighborhoods where future SETI projects ought to look more closely for alien life.

"I'm driven not so much by a desire to explain the mechanics of the universe, but rather to discover if there is life out there," he said.

Kipping is pursuing this work with fervent hopes of connecting with the unknown, but he's also agnostic about whether his quarry really exists. For although there are billions of trillions of stars in the observable universe, and many more planets orbiting them — inconceivably large numbers that have inspired many astronomers to proclaim that alien life is virtually assured — Kipping maintains that we still have no idea if other advanced civilizations exist, for the simple reason that we cannot say how easily life arises to begin with.

"It's a common mistake to say that because life arose on Earth it has likely arisen on other planets, as well," he says. "There's no statistical or logical basis for that. As I

see it, the only reasonable answer to the question of whether or not we're alone in the universe is 'I don't know.'"

And if other intelligent life-forms *do* exist in the universe, what might they look like? Probably not the upright vertebrates depicted in *Disclosure Day* and countless other science-fiction flicks, with their doe-eyed expressions, jointed limbs, and opposable thumbs.

"I often imagine that alien life could be so different from us that we'd struggle to recognize it as life at all, much less be able to interact or communicate with it," Kipping said. "Picture an entire planet covered in something resembling a fungus that's operating like a single brain. Such an entity could be more intelligent than us but have no experience interacting with another being. How would we relate to such a thing?"

There are degrees of aloneness, it seems. And plenty of chasms to bridge right here on our own planet, especially if we consider the vastness of time, as well as space, according to Kipping. He said that he recently rewatched Stanley Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey* and was moved by its image of a black monolith buried beneath the lunar surface. He imagines that perhaps the relic was left by an ancient civilization in hopes that it would one day be discovered. "I love that idea," he said. "We could do something like that." He noted that Earth will remain habitable for hundreds of millions of years, enough time for complex life to be wiped out by calamities and to evolve again many times over, possibly in radically new forms. "We could leave a time capsule to tell Earth's future inhabitants who we were, what our lives were like," he said. "I think that's probably our best chance of having communication with a non-human civilization."

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