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NOVA “WHAT ARE UFOs?” DELVES INTO THE LATEST SCIENTIFIC INVESTIGATIONS OF ONE OF THE GREATEST MYSTERIES OF OUR MODERN AGE

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Premieres Wednesday, Jan. 22, 2025, at 9 p.m.ET/8 p.m. CT on PBS

[New special will also be available for streaming at \[Lpbs.org/nova\]\(#\), \[LNOVA on YouTube\]\(#\), and the \[LPBS App\]\(#\)](#)

PASADENA, CA; July 15, 2024 – The award-winning **PBS** science series, **NOVA**, a production of **GBH**, today announced the new one-hour film **“WHAT ARE UFOs?”** will premiere **Wednesday, Jan.22, 2025, at 9 p.m. ET/8 p.m. CT on PBS (check local listings) and will also be available for streaming at [Lpbs.org/nova](#), [LNOVA on YouTube](#), and the [LPBS App](#)**. Unidentified Flying Objects have long captivated the imagination of the public, but for decades most scientists treated the subject as taboo. Now, these mysterious phenomena are moving out of the shadows and into the light, as NASA pledges to study them scientifically. So, what exactly *does* science have to say on the matter?

This new NOVA investigation looks at the evidence from every angle, marshaling expert opinions from physicists, engineers, cosmologists, and others who are bringing new technologies and heightened rigor to solving these mysteries. How can new ground-based sensors and crowdsourcing of data help explain what military pilots and others have seen? Many of these sightings can be attributed to physical objects like balloons or drones, weather phenomena, or optical illusions, but others so far remain mysterious. What other potential explanations remain? Could they be the result of secret new technologies developed by other governments – or our own? And what would it take for alien engineers to traverse vast distances to send probes or visit Earth from other solar systems?

“UFOs undeniably spark the curiosity of people internationally,” said **NOVA Co-Executive Producer Julia Cort**, “but for decades, they’ve been considered by many to be the fringiest of fringe topics, relegated to tabloid news. Now finally, more scientists are realizing that these reports need to be taken seriously. We’re excited to be able to bring the public up to date and clarify what is known – and what remains unsolved.”

“We are living in an age of conspiracy, and we need facts now more than ever,” said **Producer, Director and Writer Terri Randall**. “This film is able to address some of the viewer’s most urgent questions about UFOs from a scientific perspective. There is so much taboo and confusion surrounding the topic, and while there is still so much we don’t know, science can help us say, ‘this might not be as scary as we think.’”

The public fascination with UFOs began to grow after pilot Kenneth Arnold spotted something strange as he flew near Mount Rainier, WA in 1947. He described objects glinting off the sun and moving as if they were skipping off of water, and hence the term flying saucer was coined. This famed sighting, along with many others, ignited public interest with more and more sightings being reported. During this post-World War II period, military technology was also developing at a rapid pace – often in secret – which could account for some of the bizarre objects people were seeing in the sky, including the infamous military balloon crash in Roswell, NM in 1947. Since this balloon’s technology was top secret at the time, the US Army announced that it was just a conventional weather balloon. But the public didn’t buy that explanation, and the government’s lack of answers created a void, which Hollywood saw as an opportunity, and entertainment featuring flying saucers and dramatic alien invasions proliferated.

“We’re fascinated with UFOs. They’re mysterious and they engage our imaginations. Applying the rigor of scientific investigation and critical thinking doesn’t mean we’re taking all the fun out of them,” said **NOVA Co-Executive Producer Chris Schmidt**. “In fact, as we look closer at the evidence we’re left with better and more intriguing questions than we might have started with. Because no matter how well we explain some of these phenomena, we’ll never completely eliminate the “U” in UFO.”

Behind the scenes, the military continued to investigate these phenomena. In 1969 the Air Force ended Project Blue Book, which documented investigations of more than 12,000 UFO sightings with 701 of the cases remaining unidentified. But for scientists, not being able to explain so much of the data findings is unacceptable, which along with the pop culture hysteria around UFOs created an environment where the scientific community did not want to touch the topic. Because of this enduring stigma, NASA now refers to UFOs as UAPs: Unidentified Anomalous Phenomena.

“WHAT ARE UFOs?” features firsthand accounts from former Lt. US Navy and F/A-18F pilot Ryan Graves, whose squadron witnessed the famed “Gimbal” – the first UAP video to be declassified by the Department of Defense – aboard the USS Theodore Roosevelt off the coast of Jacksonville, FL in 2015. Graves was also the first active-duty military pilot to come forward about regular sightings of UFOs. The film also introduces viewers to the US Naval Officer and F/A-18F pilot Alex Dietrich, who in 2004 as a young aviator in training, witnessed what is considered to be one of the most important UAP encounters known as the USS Nimitz-Tic-Tac. Videos of both of these encounters were finally released to the public in 2017 when The New York Times published a landmark article on UAPs. It created a massive media frenzy which captured the attention of members of Congress who began to demand transparency.

The science community took notice as well, but scientific investigation demands evidence – presenting a myriad of obstacles in this regard. **“WHAT ARE UFOs?”** features interviews with several of the distinguished scientists that NASA brought together to examine the UFO mystery, including Shelley Wright, Professor of Astronomy & Astrophysics, Physics, University of California, San Diego; Matt Mountain, Association of Universities for Research and Astronomy; Joshua Semeter from Boston University’s College of Engineering; and Sean Kirkpatrick, the former Director of the Pentagon office dedicated to decoding UAPs. The film documents an experiment from Semeter and Kirkpatrick examining how the elusive nature of infrared light could be the key to solving the mystery of why some UAPs seem to appear and then disappear in these viral videos captured by military pilots.

“WHAT ARE UFOs?” goes on to examine why the US government continued to be so elusive about rumored UFO sightings for many decades. It turned out that the debris a rancher found in Roswell, NM back in 1947 was part of a classified program called Project Mogul where the Air Force launched balloons with sensors that could measure vibrations in order to monitor Russian nuclear testing. It took half a century for the Air Force to admit the truth, but these misidentified radar reflectors likely accounted for what became the famed flying saucers. As many people believed, there was indeed a government coverup, but it was of a classified project and not of an extraterrestrial spacecraft. The government’s secrecy fed into conspiracy theories and allowed people to come up with wild explanations for these sightings.

Government secrecy also contributed to mythbuilding around the infamous research facility Area 51, which the military did not acknowledge existed until 2013. Since the 1950s, this top-secret research facility was used to test advanced military technology including F-117, SR-71 and B2 Spirit stealth aircraft. But from a military perspective, confusion around these mysterious reported “alien sightings” created a mythical smokescreen that also helpfully hid the advanced technologies the US military was testing from adversary nations.

The film includes differing perspectives from Alejandro Rojas, a UFO journalist from Enigma Labs; Jacob Haqq-Misra, an astrobiologist for the Blue Marble Space Institute; Michael Wong, Planetary Scientist from the Carnegie Institute for Science; Hakeem Oluysef, an astrophysicist from George Mason University; and UAP/UFO investigator Mick West who takes viewers through some common sense experiments that may debunk some of the viral videos captured by some of the best pilots in the world.

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“WHAT ARE UFOs?” is a NOVA Production by Terri Randall Productions. Written, Directed, and Produced by Terri Randall. Co-produced and Edited by Jedd Ehrmann. Executive Producers for NOVA are Julia Cort and Chris Schmidt. NOVA is a production of GBH.

Funding for NOVA and **“WHAT ARE UFOs?”** is provided by Carlisle Companies, the NOVA Science Trust, the Corporation for Public Broadcasting, and PBS viewers.

About NOVA

NOVA is the most popular primetime science series on American television, demystifying the scientific and technological concepts that shape and define our lives, our planet, and our universe. The PBS series is also one of the most widely distributed science programs around the world, and is a multimedia, multiplatform brand reaching more than 55 million Americans every year on TV and online. NOVA’s important and inspiring stories of human ingenuity, exploration, and the quest for knowledge are regularly recognized with the industry’s most prestigious awards. As part of its mission to make the scientific enterprise accessible to all, NOVA is committed to diversity, equity, and inclusion in all its work, from the production process to the range of stories we tell and the voices we amplify. In addition, science educators across the country rely on NOVA for resources used in the classroom as well as in museums, libraries, and after-school programs. NOVA is a production of GBH; more information can be found at [Lpbs.org/nova](#), or by following NOVA on [LFacebook](#), [LX](#) (formerly Twitter), or [LInstagram](#).

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