MYSTERIES UNCOVERED

TRUE STORIES OF THE PARANORMAL AND UNEXPLAINED

Written by
Emily G. Thompson

DK
Penguin Random House
Skinwalker Ranch

In the late 1990s and early 2000s, the land surrounding Skinwalker Ranch, Utah, became the scene of a barrage of paranormal and unexplainable phenomena. These included UFO encounters, strange balls of light, animal mutilations, and monstrous, seemingly invulnerable creatures.

“It’s as if some cosmic puppet master had written a laundry list of every spooky phenomenon of modern times.”

Investigative journalist George Knapp
In the summer of 1996, Colm Kelleher, a research immunologist at the National Jewish Medical and Research Center in Denver, came across an intriguing job advertisement in a scientific magazine. It was for scientists interested in “exploring the origin and evolution of consciousness in the universe.” Kelleher decided to respond because he had a long-standing interest in scientific anomalies. He soon joined a team of research scientists with backgrounds in physics, biochemistry, and veterinary studies working for the National Institute of Discovery Science (NIDS).

NIDS had been founded by Las Vegas real-estate and aerospace tycoon Robert Bigelow, who wanted to remove the “crackpot element” from the study of anomalous phenomena. Bigelow’s grandparents believed that they had once seen a UFO in 1947 while driving across the Nevada desert, and from childhood on he had been fascinated with the paranormal, the mysterious, and the unexplained.1 By founding NIDS, Bigelow hoped to assemble a team of scientists who would study paranormal phenomena from an unbiased, scientific angle.

Kelleher and the other scientists soon found themselves at 480-acre Skinwalker Ranch, bordering the Ute Indian Reservation in
west Uintah County, Utah. Bigelow had purchased it in 1996 for $200,000 after a series of unaccountable occurrences had terrorized its preceding owners, the Sherman family.

The Shermans—Terry, Gwen, and their two children (whose names were never publicly revealed)—had moved to isolated Skinwalker Ranch in 1994 to raise cattle. Terry had advanced training in animal husbandry and had plans to raise hybrid animals. The ranch had sat idle for seven years after its preceding owners virtually abandoned it, returning only a couple of times a year to make sure that the fence lines were still intact. Skinwalker was located about 3 miles (5km) down a dirt trail from the nearest main road. The family, who were looking for peace and privacy, thought it was perfect, and were surprised that the preceding family had attached bolts to the ranch house’s doors and windows, and even to kitchen cabinets. On both sides of the house, iron stakes were embedded in the ground with heavy chains attached to them.

Terry Sherman assumed that the preceding owners must have kept large guard dogs, but he wasn’t sure why. The whole area was safe and quiet and virtually crime-free. The ranch was in need of extensive renovations, which the Shermans enthusiastically undertook, determined to create their dream home.

Their tranquility would soon be interrupted, however, by a series of inexplicable, often disturbing events.

Shortly after they moved in, Terry left the ranch to check on a cow that was calving in the pasture to the south of the ranch when he noticed a peculiar light in a field. The light could not have been caused by neighbors or passing cars—the main road was too far away. “It went over some poplar trees there that are probably 40 to 50 feet [12 to 15m] tall,” said Terry to the Deseret News in 1996.

This was the first UFO sighting on the ranch, but it certainly
Skinwalker Ranch

wouldn’t be the last. During their time at Skinwalker, Terry, Gwen, and their children witnessed myriad different UFOs and mysterious lights. They described a small boxlike craft with a white light, a 40-foot (12m) craft, and an extremely large craft that they estimated to be the size of several football fields. They also described watching a number of strange lights appear in the sky, including orange circular ones that appeared in midair. These lights appeared quite frequently, and sometimes the Shermans would see objects seemingly flying out of these orange lights, as if they were windows into another dimension.

One night, one of these lights seemingly followed Gwen’s car home. On another night, Terry witnessed a light appear to hide behind a rock ridge, as if it were trying to avoid him as he walked toward it. Terry concealed himself behind a hay bale. Moments later, the light appeared again. This time, however, it looked as though it was flying back and forth, almost as if it were looking for Terry. Terry decided he would try to “sneak up on the object.” As it came closer, he jumped out from behind the hay bale and began shouting and waving his hands. The light flashed on and off three times before disappearing.

Terry and Gwen noted that the lights mostly occurred during a new moon or when the sky was overcast or stormy.

Meanwhile, mysterious events were happening thick and fast on Skinwalker Ranch. One afternoon, the Shermans came across three strange circles arranged about 30 feet (9m) apart in the shape of a triangle. Nearby, they found further circles in the soil. They were about 3 feet (90cm) wide and 1 foot (30cm) deep, and the soil in the center of each circle was perfectly flat. On another occasion, the family heard noises of machinery that seemed to be coming from under the ground.
Quite often, the Shermans would lose items, only to have them turn up in odd places on the ranch. On several occasions, Gwen emerged from the shower to discover that her towel and personal items were missing from the locked bathroom. On another occasion, Terry lost a post digger, only to find it later, perched high up in a tree. One afternoon, Gwen arrived home with some groceries; she put them away, but when she went back into the kitchen, the groceries were back out on the kitchen table.

Instances of unexplained phenomena went further than lights and unseen forces. The Shermans also witnessed physical manifestations that could not be explained. They reported seeing huge wolflike creatures on the ranch, as well as dark, bipedal creatures that stood around 9 feet (2.7m) tall, comparable to the legendary, apelike Sasquatch or Bigfoot. One of the creatures that resembled an abnormally large wolf attacked a cow in broad daylight. Terry shot it several times, but his bullets seemingly had no effect and there was no blood. When the animal finally ran off toward some trees, Terry followed its footprints until they inexplicably disappeared.

The Shermans also described seeing a creature with curly red hair walking on all fours, which then attacked one of their horses. According to Terry, the beast was “low to the ground, heavily muscled, weighing perhaps 200 pounds (90kg), with curly red hair and a bushy tail.” When Terry approached the animal, it vanished. Another frightening creature the Shermans saw was almost transparent. It moved at great speed and let out a deep roar, like a cross between a bear and a lion. Later, they said this animal was comparable to the alien lifeform in the movie *Predator*.

One afternoon when Terry was out on the range, he heard male voices speaking an unfamiliar language. Terry was adamant that
Skinwalker Ranch

the disembodied voices were coming from around 25 feet (7.6m) above him; however, he couldn’t see a thing. As he stood perplexed, trying to ascertain what exactly he was hearing and where it was coming from, his dogs became frantic, barking and growling at something before running back to the ranch. On another occasion, Terry discovered four of his prize bulls stuffed inside a trailer with the door secured shut. “For a long time, we wondered what we were seeing, if it was something to do with a top-secret project,” said Terry. “I don’t know really what to think about it . . .”1

To add to the already bizarre catalog of events, the Sherman family reported that their cattle began turning up dead. One cow had a hole, around 6 inches (15cm) wide by 1 inch (2.5cm) deep, carved out of its rectum. Another one was found with a missing eyeball. In addition to the two mutilated cows, four completely vanished without a trace. In one instance, Terry noticed that there were hoofprints leading to a field that abruptly stopped at the edge near trees. Around the final cluster of hoofprints, Terry noticed a circle of broken twigs and branches. Furthermore, the treetops appeared to have been cut off. Terry wondered whether something had come down from the sky and abducted the cow. “It was just gone. It was very bizarre.”1

Terry said that several other ranchers had called the police to report mutilation of their livestock, but they had been told that there was nothing they could do about it. However, Sheriff Ralph Stansfield of Duchesne County claimed that he was unaware of any reports of UFO sightings or livestock mutilations within the time frame. Terry was distinctly unimpressed. “We’ve seen the UFOs enough and we know pretty much what the craft look like, and I think it’s definitely associated with the cattle mutilations—when we see the crafts and then the cattle, we have problems,” Terry said.
In fact, at various times in the past, several local people had witnessed things that they could not explain. Leland Mecham, who lived in Neola, Duchesne County, allegedly witnessed UFOs twice—once in the mid-1960s and another in the mid-1970s. He described the second craft as a massive object with colorful rays of light emanating from underneath. He said it appeared to be scanning the area before elevating, shooting across the sky, and vanishing. “There’s no way it was swamp gas or balloons like everybody tries to pass it off,” he said.

Retired high school science teacher Joseph Hicks spent years researching the area’s paranormal sightings after another teacher witnessed a UFO with his students back in 1951. “It was cigar-shaped, sitting on the ground during daylight, and was seen by 30 students and their teacher from about 50 feet [15m] away . . .”2 He estimated that at least half of the 50,000 residents of the Uintah basin had seen unexplained objects in the sky, and he himself claimed to have witnessed a UFO over the city of Roosevelt, Utah, in the mid-1970s.6

Hicks’ research led him to investigate the history of the area. Skinwalker Ranch is surrounded by the Uintah and Ouray Indian Reservation, and members of the Ute people lived in the region for centuries, long before European settlers arrived in the mid-1800s. The Ute fought to expel the Navajo from the area shortly before the settlers arrived. The Navajo eventually left the area to the Ute, but, according to legend, they left upon them the curse of the “skinwalker,” a witch that could take on the form of a human or an animal that could not be killed. “The Navajos lost and then, in turn, cursed the Utes with the skinwalker, saying a spiritual person that changes into a wolf will be here to harass you, and they accepted that,” explained Hicks. “It all seems to be concentrated
on the ranch. The Utes don’t mess with it. They have stories about the place that go back 15 generations. They say the ranch is in the path of the skinwalker.”

One of the most distressing encounters for the Shermans took place in May 1996. As night was falling, a blue orb appeared in the sky, darting around a field near the ranch. The Shermans had seen these blue orbs numerous times by now. While these lights seemed innocuous, the sight of them always left the family feeling anxious and fearful. On this occasion, Terry encouraged three of his dogs to pursue the orb. The dogs chased the light into the trees bordering the ranch. They disappeared out of sight, but moments later Terry heard the sound of distressed yelps, followed by complete silence. The three dogs never returned, no matter how much Terry hollered for them. The following morning, Terry set out to look for them. Just past the treeline, he found three spots with a black greasy lump in the middle of each one. Terry was sure that the dogs had been incinerated by something.

In the summer of 1996, the Deseret News ran an article about the Sherman family and the strange occurrences at their ranch. Terry hadn’t wanted to go public, but, by this point, the family was desperate for answers. After reading the article, Robert Bigelow flew out to Utah and made the Sherman family an offer they couldn’t refuse: $200,000 for the ranch. The Sherman family moved to a smaller homestead around 15 miles (24km) away, but stayed on as ranchers and caretakers at Skinwalker Ranch. They had to sign nondisclosure agreements forbidding them from speaking about scientific activity on the ranch.

“At the end, the family was sleeping on the floor in one room together,” commented investigative journalist George Knapp, the coauthor, with Colm A. Kelleher, of Hunt for the Skinwalker in 2005.
In the years that followed, many would question why the family stayed on at the ranch for so long—almost two years. According to Kelleher, Terry was a proud and stubborn man who, for quite a while, had concluded that the military was behind the unexplained phenomena and had turned his ranch into a testing ground for advanced military equipment. He didn’t want to leave because “he was going to catch them.”\textsuperscript{8} By the time Terry went to Deseret News, however, he had abandoned this conclusion and was convinced that the events were supernatural in origin.

Bigelow moved his NIDS team to Skinwalker and they set up an observation post and equipped the ranch with video cameras and audio recording equipment, observing it 24 hours a day. “Our approach is to do good, high-quality research using a standard scientific approach and do what we can to get hard data,” said John B. Alexander, member of NIDS and former director of nonlethal weapons testing at Los Alamos National Laboratories in New Mexico.\textsuperscript{9}

The phenomena that had plagued the Sherman family continued. Over the next few months, the scientists allegedly saw large, ferocious animals with piercing yellow or red eyes. Although seen, these creatures left no visible tracks, and when the scientists attempted to shoot them, they were seemingly invulnerable. One evening, two of the scientists and Terry spotted a large animal in the branches of a tree with another large animal at the base of the tree. The animal in the branches was described as having “reptilian eyes” and a head that was around 3 feet (0.9m) wide. The one at the base of the trees was described as a massive, doglike creature. Terry aimed his hunting rifle at the animals. The one at the bottom of the tree vanished before he could fire, while the one in the branches fell out of the tree.
However, when Terry and the others searched for its body, it was nowhere to be seen.

On one occasion in winter, the scientists came across a perfectly round ice circle on the ground, much like a crop circle. No footprints surrounded the ice circle, and the ice was too thin to support much weight. The scientists also reported that they witnessed what they could only describe as a rectangular portal that opened in the ground. On several occasions, the NIDS team saw orbs and UFOs in the sky, yet when they meticulously placed audio and video recording devices around the ranch to catch evidence of anything anomalous, they recorded nothing. However, they did notice a pattern. If the scientists placed extra cameras and personnel in the southern field, the mysterious activity would intensify in the northern field and vice versa.

In another inexplicable incident, equipment set up by the scientists was vandalized and wiring was shredded. This equipment was in direct view of a remote camera, but when the NIDS team reviewed the footage, expecting to discover who—or what—had caused the damage, they saw nothing. “It was very difficult to gather the kind of evidence consistent with scientific publication,” observed Kelleher. In addition, most of the paranormal events on Skinwalker Ranch only happened a few times, making them impossible to study in sufficient detail.

One of the most disturbing events took place at around 10am on March 10, 1997. Terry and Gwen were out on the pasture tagging calves; they tagged one and weighed it at 84 pounds (38kg). Other than a strange, musky odor, everything seemed to be normal. They left the calf with its mother and continued with their duties. Around 40 minutes later, the Shermans’ dog began growling and raising his
hackles. The Shermans had not noticed anything out of the ordinary or heard any strange noises. The dog then took off. It was never seen again. The Shermans walked back through the pasture and spotted the mother of the calf they had tagged earlier running around in a half-circle, limping. As they approached the mother, they spotted the calf. It was torn open and spreadeagled on the ground. Vital organs were missing, as well as one of its ears. Nearby, they found one of the calf’s femurs picked clean. However, there was not a trace of blood on the ground or on the calf. In just 40 minutes, some unseen force had entered the field and carefully torn the calf apart without anybody seeing or hearing a thing.

The Shermans called NIDS, who had taken a rare weekend off and returned to Las Vegas, to report their grim discovery. When the scientific team arrived at the scene, a veterinarian noticed that the missing ear appeared to have been surgically removed. A sniffer dog was unable to pick up the scent of any other animal, and NIDS was unable to find any tracks of a vehicle or footprints. “The bottom line is this animal must have been killed elsewhere because there was no blood at the scene, and then the animal must have been brought back, laid down carefully, almost ritually on the spot where it had been tagged,” said Kelleher. NIDS were unable to determine what had caused the mutilation but said that it must have been mechanical.1 It was evident that whatever had caused the calf’s wounds, certainly wasn’t a natural predator.

While many hoped that the NIDS investigation would expose the tales of the extraordinary events of Skinwalker Ranch as some kind of hallucination, natural phenomenon, or hoax, the opposite occurred. In their book, Hunt for the Skinwalker—the basis for a 2018 documentary—Kelleher and Knapp detailed how the group of scientists tried to find an explanation for the plethora of strange
activity, including attributing them to experiments being conducted at the nearby Army base. However, they could reach no conclusion. “It’s as if some cosmic puppet master had written a laundry list of every spooky phenomenon of modern times,” said Knapp, “and then unleashed them all in a single location, resulting in a supernatural smorgasbord that no one could possibly believe, much less understand.”11 NIDS disbanded in 2004 after paranormal phenomena at the ranch dramatically decreased.

In 2016, Robert Bigelow sold Skinwalker Ranch to Adaman-tium Real Estate—a shell corporation of unknown origin—for $4.5 million. All roads leading to the ranch were subsequently blocked and the perimeter guarded by cameras and barbed wire to prevent would-be paranormal investigators from breaking in. “Anyone expecting to find the ranch and see UFOs or Bigfoot will be deeply disappointed,” said Knapp in a 2002 article for the Las Vegas Mercury News. “Paranormal activity on the property has all but disappeared over the past year, which is a primary reason that access was obtained from NIDS for this article.”

In 2017, the New York Times broke a story on a secretive government UFO program named Advanced Aerospace Weapons Systems Application Program, which had been run by Pentagon counterintelligence staffer Luis Elizondo. According to the article, in 2007 an unidentified senior official from a national security agency visited Skinwalker Ranch after developing a keen interest in UFOs. According to Knapp, this unidentified individual, who he described as a “DIA [Defense Intelligence Agency] scientist,” had an “experience” while visiting the ranch.12 That experience made so much of an impact on this individual that he convinced the DIA to seriously investigate paranormal and UFO phenomena. He then met with Senator Harry Reid and they decided to start a research
program on UFOs. All they needed was somebody with experience in Ufology and paranormal activity to conduct the research. The program was handed to Bigelow under a government contract, and he received $22 million to study and generate reports on exotic science, UFOs, and other unexplained phenomena. The article added that the bizarre events on Skinwalker Ranch were part of the study, but after two years Bigelow’s government funding ran out and the Advanced Aerospace Weapons System Application Program was cancelled. Its findings were never made public and Bigelow remained silent as to what occurred at Skinwalker Ranch.

The New York Times piece was accompanied by two videos. The footage showed US Navy jets encountering mysterious craft that were moving at abnormal speeds. The videos went viral and became the subject of fevered speculation by Ufologists. The Navy was forced to confirm the videos’ veracity and the dates they were recorded. The footage had been captured by pilots flying from two aircraft carriers, the USS Nimitz and the USS Theodore Roosevelt, off the coasts of California and Florida in 2004 and 2015. Joseph Gradisher, a spokesman for the office of the Deputy Chief of Naval Operations for Information Warfare, announced that the objects were “unidentified” but said that the Navy would not offer “any hypothesis or conclusions in regard to the objects contained in the referenced videos.”

Then in March 2020, Utah-based real estate mogul Brandon Fugal came forward as the owner of Skinwalker Ranch after remaining anonymous since his 2016 purchase of it. He invited Vice magazine to the ranch for a tour and an interview. Fugal had set up the ranch with state-of-the-art sensors and cameras specially designed to detect UFOs and other anomalies. “Skinwalker Ranch,
Skinwalker Ranch

as a project, is so unconventional and so outside of my normal course of business and really, frankly, anyone’s normal course of business, that it presents a whole new problem set,” Fugal commented. He told Vice that, since purchasing Skinwalker Ranch, he had captured evidence of unaccountable injuries, footage of anomalous aerial phenomena, transient EMF, and a number of other mysterious phenomena. He also revealed that extreme electromagnetic fields had been logged on the ranch and detailed that a number of his scientists working at the ranch had become ill—some even required hospitalization. One of them, Thomas Winterton, was hospitalized with fluid on the brain. According to Fugal, this was caused by Winterton attempting to dig on the land. “As for my team, my scientists will be working on releasing reports and information on a peer-reviewed basis in the future,” Fugal said.

The “living laboratory” that NIDS had created on Skinwalker Ranch represented the largest-ever scientific study of unidentified phenomena in history. Although they were unable to reach a conclusion, many others have attempted to explain what truly happened on Skinwalker Ranch in the late 1990s and early 2000s. Northern Utah is home to a number of Army and Air Force installations, and it has been suggested that military activity could have accounted for the mysterious lights in the sky and UFOs. Some commentators believe that the military was conducting experiments in psychological warfare. However, if that were the case, someone somewhere would have witnessed military men operating in such an isolated and rural area. Ball lightning has also been a theory put forward to explain the strange lights, but according to Terry the lights always appeared to be intelligently controlled.

Perhaps not surprisingly, the events at Skinwalker Ranch have been blamed on pranksters, although it is hard to see how a
prankster, or even a team of pranksters, could be responsible for all of the phenomena witnessed. Some have simply explained the phenomena away as a case of mass hysteria. However, that explanation does not account for the well-documented cattle mutilations. NIDS themselves even considered the possibility that groups might have been conducting some kind of ritualistic campaign at the ranch. Committed Ufologists have proposed that the phenomena could only be connected to extraterrestrial activity.

Some scientists believe that there is another possibility worth considering: alternate dimensions or parallel universes. According to quantum physics, portals may possibly exist that connect our world to other worlds and alternate dimensions. Based on these theories, it is possible that, hidden on Skinwalker Ranch, is a portal to an unknown world, and that via this portal other entities can come and go.

Skinwalker Ranch has been dubbed “the strangest place on Earth.” If the tales surrounding it are to be believed, it certainly appears to have been an epicenter of extraterrestrial activity. “You know, facing the reality of our mortality is sobering. The anomalies at Skinwalker Ranch, the things that have been reported there over decades, if not hundreds, of years—they seem to attest to the fact that we live in a strange universe,” said Brandon Fugal in March 2020. “Perhaps, we’re not alone . . .”

"Mysteries Uncovered"
Endnotes

3 UFOs: Generals, Pilots, and Government Officials Go on the Record, Leslie Kean
4 “New Light on Rendlesham,” Dr. David Clarke: drdavidclarke.co.uk/secret-files/secret-files-4
5 The UFO Files: The Inside Story of Real-Life Sightings, David Clarke
6 You Can’t Tell the People, Georgina Bruni and Nick Pope
7 The Halt Tapes: www.ianridpath.com/ufo/halttape.htm
9 The People, September 23, 2012: “The Rendlesham Forest Incident”
10 “The 3AM Fireball—How It All Started,” Ian Ridpath: www.ianridpath.com/ufo/rendlesham1d.htm
11 UFO Crash Landing? Friend or Foe?, Jenny Randles
12 UFOS and Nukes: The Secret Link Revealed, 2016
13 UFO FAQ: All That’s Left to Know About Roswell, Aliens, Whirling Discs, and Flying Saucers, David J. Hogan
15 East Anglian Daily Times, January 2, 2019: “Rendlesham Forest UFO ‘Was SAS Pranking the Americans’”
16 East Anglian Daily Times, September 7, 2018: “We Are Not Alone—UFO-Spotting Colonel Halt Shares His Memories”

Skinwalker Ranch

1 The Daily Beast, July 2, 2015: “Why Do UFOs Love This Utah Ranch So Much?”

257
Endnotes

2 Hunt for the Skinwalker, Colm Kelleher and George Knapp
3 Uintah Basin Standard, September 24, 2016: “Skinwalker Ranch Activity Shifts from Paranormal to Prosecutable”
4 Deseret News, June 30, 1996: “Frequent Fliers?”
5 Salt Lake City Examiner, May 3, 2010: “Utah’s Skinwalker Ranch”
6 The Path of the Skinwalker, George Knapp
7 Seeking Out the Skinwalker, April Slaughter
9 Santa Fe New Mexican, October 24, 1996: “Millionaire Buys Utah’s ‘UFO Ranch’”
10 Deseret News, April 22, 2006: “Mysteries of ‘UFO Ranch’ in Spotlight”
11 Las Vegas City Life, February 2, 2006: “The Truth Could Be in There”
12 UFO MegaCon, 2019
14 Air & Space, February 1, 2020: “In 2019, Our Eyes Were on the Skies”
15 Vice, March 10, 2020: “This Is the Real Estate Magnate Who Bought Skinwalker Ranch, a UFO Hotspot”

The Phoenix Lights

1 Summary of Phoenix Lights Event by Peter B. Davenport: http://www.ufoevidence.org/documents/doc1276.htm
2 Life Examiner, February 24, 2010: “Were the 1997 Arizona Lights a Psychological Warfare Experiment?”