

Marfa Lights up in the Houston Chronicle

The *Houston Chronicle* is the largest daily newspaper in the state of Texas, the ninth largest in the United States, according to Wikipedia. Large newspapers, the traditional backbone of major media, rarely publish ideas that contradict basic assumptions of the society in which they exist. It was no surprise when the *Houston Chronicle's* December 19, 2010, print edition played to the audience with the article "What's going on in Marfa?" published online on December 16. The subject was *Marfa Lights*. It played to the assumption that no "dinosaur" could live in Marfa, Texas.

The article was elicited by a press release by Jonathan Whitcomb, part of a national promotion for his new book, the second edition of *Live Pterosaurs in America*. The *Houston Chronicle* gave no details about that press release, giving no quotations from it. It mentioned two scientists, James Bunnell and Karl Stephan, both of whom seem to have dismissed the possibility of modern pterosaurs. Neither Bunnell nor Stephan is a biologist.

Whitcomb's idea of bioluminescent flying predators, perhaps even living pterosaurs, as an explanation for some of the mystery lights of Marfa, was dismissed, but there's more: His qualifications for making that suggestion were questioned, to put it mildly.

While Whitcomb has been effective in broadcasting his views, he acknowledges that he has no scientific training, has never been to Marfa and has not seen the creatures whose patterns and habits he attempts to describe. He did make a trip to Papua New Guinea to investigate flying predators there but saw none.

The writer of the *Houston Chronicle* article, Claudia Feldman, seems to have overlooked an important part of science: the theoretical scientist. Like a detective who questions eyewitnesses and pieces together ideas based on what eyewitnesses have said, the theoretical scientist does not necessarily need to be an eyewitness, especially when eyewitnesses are plentiful or especially trustworthy. One name that comes to mind is Albert Einstein. He had limited, if any, training in physics; he had never been to an area where there was a total solar eclipse; he never saw the physics experiments that caused him to work at his theories. But he trusted the data from the experiments of those scientists who worked hands-on with scientific equipment.

That is not to say that Whitcomb is an Einstein. I only suggest that the writer of that article in the *Houston Chronicle* misses an important point, and she could have dismissed Einstein as unqualified, if she had lived and had written newspaper articles in Europe about a century ago.

I suggest that Claudia Feldman, the staff writer for the *Houston Chronicle*, would have done better to have written about what Whitcomb has done, not what he has not done. But then an article too friendly to the possibility of modern pterosaurs might not have been accepted for publication by her superiors.