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New York Air National Guard

A closer look at eight weeks of mysterious drone sightings

The Suffolk Times, January 13, 2025 ::

Suffolk County Sheriff Errol Toulon was joined by County Executive Ed Romaine and other officials in calling for more help from the federal government following a rash of drone sightings at Francis Gabreski airport. (Credit: Chris Francescani)

For two months now, residents across the Northeast have reported thousands of mysterious nighttime drone sightings, and the Federal Aviation Administration — which has sole authority over U.S. airspace — has yet to explain what is behind the phenomenon. In growing numbers, local and state officials are calling on the federal government to do more to help identify the drones, pursue pilots operating unlawfully and make sense of the situation to an increasingly wary American public. Here is a closer look at some of the unfolding developments that have come to light in recent weeks.

Have drones been spotted over the East End?

There have been multiple reports of unexplained drone activity on both forks, including several over Southold and three over Riverhead last month, as well as at least one over Shelter Island and one in Laurel this month. Just after the New Year, county officials revealed that Francis Gabreski airport in Westhampton Beach has experienced repeated breaches of restricted airspace surrounding the airport, which serves as the headquarters of the 106th Rescue Wing of the New York Air National Guard.

There is little uniformity among the sightings. Some drones have been observed hovering for hours in one place, while other reports detail clusters of drones or unidentified objects flying in various patterns.

Southold Police Chief Steven Grattan — himself a licensed drone pilot — said recently that residents and police officers reported sightings of “sedan-sized” drones above Orient, Mattituck, Cutchogue and Southold on Dec. 13 and 14 that appeared to be flying in an unusual pattern.

According to this report, “[law enforcement] personnel observed drones [that] appeared to be flying in a zigzag-style pattern near Route 48 and Route 25 in the Mattituck, Cutchogue and Southold areas.”

North Haven resident David Wind was in his backyard under a “crystal clear sky” just after dusk on Christmas night when he spotted what appeared to be a large drone about 1,000 to 1,500 feet in the air, hovering in a stationary position.

“As I watched it, I started looking around, and I noticed a couple [of] planets, and then I saw a few more [drones],” he said in an interview. “And as I started counting, I identified, the first night ... seven distinct and similar shaped items, all with the same pattern of blinking.”

Mr. Wind, an attorney and a drone pilot, said the light patterns on the drones were triangular in shape, unlike the quad copter design of many consumer drones, including his own DJI Mavic.

“These were not ordinary aircraft,” he said, adding that there was “no discernable noise whatsoever.”

Then Mr. Wind spotted another drone, “even lower,” hovering over the bridge connecting North Haven to Sag Harbor, and called police.

“They sent a bunch of officers out, and they were able to corroborate they were drones,” he said, adding that afterward, the officers “went to Long Beach and saw an even higher number of them.”

Mr. Wind said that he watched the drones hover for what “must have been four or five hours. A few of them moved, but really with no discernable pattern.”

The sightings continued for three nights, he said.

At a Jan. 3 press conference, county officials pressed for federal help after the rash of drone sightings over or near Gabreski became a threat to airport operations. As with all working airports, the five-mile radius surrounding the base is a no-fly zone for drones.

Suffolk County Chief Deputy Sheriff Chris Brockmeyer said drones are being spotted “over the airport, over taxiways, over runways — and that’s a serious safety concern.”

A 2018 FAA study found that drone collisions can cause more structural damage to airplanes than birds of the same weight at a given impact speed.

In response to the Gabreski airport press conference, an FAA spokesperson said in a statement that the agency “looks into all reports of unauthorized drone operations and investigates when appropriate.

“The FAA works with federal and local law enforcement partners to educate them about how to respond to unsafe or unauthorized drone operations,” the statement said. “FAA personnel in the 77 local Flight Standards District Offices (FSDO) across the country perform investigations and, when necessary, take appropriate enforcement actions.”

The large circle in red denotes controlled airspace around Francis Gabreski airport in Westhampton Beach. (OpenSky)

A DeDrone detection system was installed earlier this month at Gabreski airport, according to Suffolk County Sheriff Errol Toulon’s office.

The system works by using a combination of sensors that include radio frequency detectors, radar and cameras which are analyzed by AI algorithms to spot, track and locate drones in real time. The devices can sometimes pinpoint pilot locations, according to the manufacturer, Axon — a multi-billion-dollar technology company with a focus on public safety, which also produces police Tasers and body-worn cameras. A drone detection system made by Robin Radar Systems is also in use in New York state, according to NBC News.

While Suffolk County officials said that attempting to shoot down drones flying in restricted airspace is extremely dangerous — “too dangerous” — Nassau County Executive Bruce Blakeman said last month that his county police were authorized to fire on drones that pose a threat.

“We don’t want to wait until we have some kind of disastrous event to then say, ‘Well, we could have done this and we could have done that,’ ” Mr. Blakeman said.

“The Nassau County Police Department has the authority and certainly has my approval that if there is a mass gathering anywhere and there is a drone that is a threat to the public at large, they have the authority and the jurisdiction and the right to shoot down that drone.”

Mr. Blakeman’s statements followed the FAA’s implementation of a temporary drone ban over parts of New Jersey and New York, which authorized local law enforcement agencies to use “deadly force” if a drone presented an “imminent security threat.”

Geo-fencing, “directed energy” weapons designed to neutralize drones remotely and other counter-drone strategies are evolving rapidly, but most are currently out of reach for local agencies.

What are the rules for legal drone operations?

All drones that weigh .55 pounds or more must be registered with the FAA and more than one million are currently registered in the U.S., according to the agency. Recreational operators are required to pass the FAA’s Recreational UAS Safety Test, known as TRUST. To become a commercially licensed drone pilot, which generally includes anyone who profits from drone use, requires far more extensive training and passing the FAA’s Part 107 exam. Both commercial and recreational drones must remain at or below 400 feet at all times, and the drone must remain within the line of sight of the pilot or, in some cases, a spotter.

Drone pilots cannot fly in restricted airspace without explicit permission — which in some instances can be obtained by using LAANC [Low Altitude Authorization and Notification Capability], an online tool to secure real-time authorization through apps like B4UFLy. Until a few years ago, it was illegal to operate a drone at night in the U.S. without a federal waiver. In 2021, the FAA began authorizing night flights for drones equipped with anti-collision lights that are visible for at least three miles.

Has anyone been caught in connection with the unexplained sightings?

Suffolk County officials said that none of the drone pilots behind recent aerial incursions into Gabreski airspace have been identified. Despite a Congressional mandate to incorporate millions of consumer and commercial drones into U.S. airspace in recent years, the FAA remains severely limited in its ability to enforce its own regulations. Between October 2022 and June 2024, the FAA fined a total of just 27 operators for violating federal drone regulations.

When did this phenomenon start?

The nighttime drone sightings began in mid-November in New Jersey and have spread throughout the tri-state area, with more than 5,000 sightings reported across the Northeast. Witnesses have described seeing clusters of what appeared to be drones — many of them larger than typical hobby drones, and some as large as cars — racing through the night skies. Public concerns first spread in November after the unidentified objects appeared near the U.S. military research and manufacturing facility known as the Picatinny Arsenal, as well as over President-elect Donald Trump's Bedminster golf course.

Gov. Kathy Hochul first acknowledged the sightings on Dec. 13 but said that, “at this time there's no evidence that these drones pose a public safety or a national security threat.”

In a joint statement issued last month, the departments of Homeland Security and Defense, along with the FBI and the FAA, said the public should not be concerned.

“Having closely examined the technical data and tips from concerned citizens, we assess that the sightings to date include a combination of lawful commercial drones, hobbyist drones and law enforcement drones, as well as manned fixed-wing aircraft, helicopters and stars mistakenly reported as drones,” the statement said. “We have not identified anything anomalous and do not assess the activity to date to present a national security or public safety risk over the civilian airspace in New Jersey or other states in the Northeast.”

The Association of Uncrewed Vehicle Systems International, the nation's largest nonprofit industry trade group, weighed in last month as well, with AUVSI president Michael Robbins saying that drones have become a vital component of dozens of industries ranging from first responders and law enforcement to agriculture, film-making and infrastructure inspections.

“However, the lack of adequate government investment in airspace awareness technology has left the nation ill-equipped to reliably distinguish between lawful drone operations, careless activity and potential threats,” Mr. Robbins said in a statement. “This week's sightings highlight the urgent need for the U.S. to modernize its approach to airspace monitoring and regulation. The lack of clear rules and sufficient

airspace awareness has led to these positive applications being overshadowed by concerns of misuse and safety. ”

What to do if you spot a suspected unauthorized drone

State, county and local police departments are fielding and in some cases investigating reports of drone sightings. Chief Grattan said that sightings logged by his department are forwarded to the New York State Office of Counter Terrorism, Homeland Security and the Suffolk County Police Department. A spokesperson for the Suffolk County Sheriff’s Office said that drone sightings can be reported to SheriffTips@SuffolkCountyNy.gov or by calling 311. The FAA’s 77 field offices also take reports directly on the agency’s websites.

<https://suffolktimes.timesreview.com/2025/01/a-closer-look-at-eight-weeks-of-mysterious-drone-sightings/>

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New York Army National Guard

National Guard soldier from Albion promoted

Orleans Hub.com, January 16, 2025 :

Nathan Stefanini from Albion, who is assigned to the Company D in the 427th Brigade Support Battalion, received a promotion Dec. 19 to the rank of private 1st class.

Major General Ray Shields, the adjutant general for the state of New York, announced the promotion today.

Army National Guard promotions are based on a soldier’s overall performance, demonstrated leadership abilities, professionalism and future development potential.

The New York National Guard (New York State Division of Military and Naval Affairs) is the state’s executive agency responsible to the governor for managing New York’s military forces, which consists of nearly 20,000 members of the New York Army National Guard, the New York Air National Guard, the New York Naval Militia and the New York Guard.

<https://orleanshub.com/national-guard-soldier-from-albion-promoted-4/>

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Presidential inauguration

New York guardsmen headed to inauguration

The Daily Star, January 16, 2025 :

Five hundred New York National Guard soldiers and airmen are deploying to Washington D.C. to support the 60th presidential inauguration on Jan. 20.

According to a news release from the state Division of Military & Naval Affairs, soldiers and airmen began leaving for Washington Thursday, Jan. 16, and are expected to return by Jan. 21 and 22.

The New Yorkers are among several thousand National Guard members who routinely support the District of Columbia National Guard during the event, the release stated.

The bulk of the personnel will be New York Army National military police soldiers from units across the state.

Base security force airmen from the New York Air National Guard's 105th Airlift Wing in Newburg will also be part of the force.

https://www.thedailystar.com/news/local_news/new-york-guardsmen-headed-to-inauguration/article_62218a0a-d45e-11ef-b65c-5b2b6d16af90.html

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New York National Guard sends 500 troops to Washington to support presidential inauguration

Rome Sentinel, January 17, 2025 :

LATHAM — Five hundred New York National Guard Soldiers and Airmen are deploying to Washington D.C. to support the 60th Presidential Inauguration on Monday, Jan. 20. The New York troops began leaving for the nation's capital on Thursday and are expected to return by Jan. 21 and 22.

The New Yorkers are among several thousand National Guard members who routinely support the District of Columbia National Guard during the event. The bulk of the personnel will be New York Army National military police soldiers from units across the state.

Base security force airmen from the New York Air National Guard's 105th Airlift Wing in Newburg will also be part of the force. They will be tasked with traffic control and crowd management functions and will be deputized as "special police" for the District of Columbia while on duty.

The New York National Guard will also deploy an Air National Guard food service team from the 105th Airlift Wing, communications specialists, and members of the 24th Weapons of Mass Destruction Civil Support Team. The members of the Civil Support Team, which is based at Fort Hamilton in Brooklyn, are trained to identify and respond to chemical, biological and radiological hazards.

An Army National Guard public affairs team will also be part of the deployment.

https://www.romesentinel.com/news/new-york-national-guard-sends-500-troops-to-washington-to-support-presidential-inauguration/article_264256bc-d414-11ef-9820-f35d50bb37e8.html

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National Guard to Support Presidential Inauguration

Army.mil, January 15, 2025 :

WASHINGTON - National Guard members from approximately 40 states, territories and the District of Columbia will support the 60th Presidential Inauguration at the request of the Secret Service, U.S. Capitol and Metropolitan Police.

With a longstanding tradition of supporting presidential inaugurations, the National Guard plays a crucial role in balancing safety, security and other duties during the peaceful transition of power.

National Guard involvement in presidential inaugurations dates to the Republic's early years. When George Washington traveled from his home in Mount Vernon, Virginia, local predecessors to the modern-day National Guard escorted him to the capital in New York City for the first presidential inauguration. Reflective of the D.C. National Guard's unique role in presidential inaugurations, President Abraham Lincoln received his first salute from a D.C. Guardsman during his inauguration in 1861.

The National Guard's role in inaugurations continued through the years, including the inauguration of President Barack Obama in 2008, which attracted one of the largest audiences ever gathered in Washington. During the inauguration of President Joseph R. Biden, Jr. in 2021, more than 25,000 National Guard personnel from the District of Columbia, 50 states and three territories supported the event, ensuring the smooth conduct of the ceremony and the safety of attendees.

For the Jan. 20 inauguration of President-elect Donald Trump, the D.C. National Guard will once again lead support efforts, with Army and Air National Guard units from some 40 states and territories joining the mission.

The Secret Service remains the lead for the planning and execution of this domestic operation. Some National Guard members will support the U.S. Capitol Police and may assist with their duties in U.S. Capitol buildings and grounds. These National Guard members will serve primarily in a support role and will be clearly distinguished from civilian law enforcement officers.

National Guard personnel assist in various critical tasks, including crowd management, traffic control, emergency response services, communication and other functions. Additionally, the National Guard is trained and ready to support civil authorities in other capacities if needed, ensuring a coordinated and secure event for the peaceful transfer of power.

Iowa Air National Guard Tech. Sgt. Dylan Hinds was with eight clinicians from Iowa's 185th Air Refueling Wing who departed from the Sioux City airport Wednesday en route to the nation's capital to provide medical care for Guard members temporarily stationed in Washington for the inauguration.

"Anybody that gets sick, flu or any minor injuries, we will be taking care of that," Hinds said.

Vincent De Groot of the Iowa Air National Guard contributed.

https://www.army.mil/article/282547/national_guard_to_support_presidential_inauguration

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Stewart National Guardsmen deployed to Washington for presidential inauguration

MidHudson News.com, January 16, 2025 :

WASHINGTON – With the presidential inauguration set for Monday, January 20, the New York National Guard is sending 500 troops to Washington to support the swearing in of Donald Trump. Among those deployed are members of the New York Air National Guard's 105th Airlift Wing at Stewart Airport.

The New Yorkers are among several thousand National Guard members who routinely support the District of Columbia National Guard during the event.

The bulk of the personnel will be New York Army National Guard military police soldiers from units across the state.

The Stewart Air Guard members will be tasked with traffic control and crowd management functions and will be deputized as "special police" for the District of Columbia while on duty.

The New York National Guard will also deploy an Air National Guard food service team from the 105th Airlift Wing, communications, specialists, and members of the 24th Weapons of Mass Destruction Civil Support Team.

<https://midhudsonnews.com/2025/01/16/stewart-national-guardsmen-deployed-to-washington-for-presidential-inauguration/>

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New York National Guard sending 500 troops to Washington to support presidential inauguration

Niagara Frontier Publications, January 16, 2025:

Five hundred New York National Guard soldiers and airmen are deploying to Washington, D.C., to support the 60th presidential inauguration, set for Jan. 20.

Soldiers and airmen began leaving for Washington on Thursday and are expected to return by Jan. 21 and 22.

The New Yorkers are among several thousand National Guard members who routinely support the District of Columbia National Guard during the event.

The bulk of the personnel will be New York Army National military police soldiers from units across the state. Base security force airmen from the New York Air National Guard's 105th Airlift Wing in Newburg will also be part of the force. They will be tasked with traffic control and crowd management functions, and will be deputized as "special police" for the District of Columbia while on duty.

The New York National Guard will also deploy an Air National Guard food service team from the 105th Airlift Wing, communications specialists, and members of the 24th Weapons of Mass Destruction Civil Support Team.

The members of the Civil Support Team, which is based at Fort Hamilton in Brooklyn, are trained to identify and respond to chemical, biological and radiological hazards.

An Army National Guard public affairs team will also be part of the deployment.

<https://www.wnypapers.com/news/article/current/2025/01/16/162032/new-york-national-guard-sending-500-troops-to-washington-to-support-presidential-inauguration>

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Subway Mission

Gov. Hochul wants police on every subway train overnight

WPIX, January 14, 2025 :

NEW YORK CITY (PIX11) – Police should patrol every New York City subway train during the overnight hours, Gov. Kathy Hochul proposed during her State of the State address Tuesday.

The state will help pay for two police officers on every subway train from 9 p.m. to 5 a.m. for the next six months, Hochul said. The increased patrols could go into effect as early as next week, according to a spokesperson for the governor's office.

Hochul's tax cut proposal: What it means for New Yorkers

"We have to stop the chaos," Hochul said.

Pilot program provides delivery trucks with safe zones

Hochul said she will work with the city to implement the temporary overnight patrols.

In March, Hochul announced the National Guard would patrol the New York City Subway system, and in December, added 250 more National Guard members.

Earlier this month the city announced police officers would be deployed to the 50 subway stations where most crimes occur, NYPD Commissioner Jessica Tisch announced.

Major crime in the transit system decreased for a second straight year in 2024, down 5.4% compared to 2023, according to Tisch. But some high-profile crimes have caught the city's attention in recent months, including a woman being burned to death on a Brooklyn subway in late December.

In her State of the State address, Hochul also announced a new tax cut plan to reduce taxes for over 8.3 million New Yorkers. The program will affect joint filers making under \$323,000 per year, she said.

<https://pix11.com/news/local-news/gov-hochul-wants-police-on-every-subway-train-overnight/>

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Cops will start patrolling overnight subways on Monday

City and State, January 16, 2025 :

Police will start patrolling overnight subway trains sooner than you may have thought.

Gov. Kathy Hochul announced on Thursday that 300 New York City Police Department officers are set to begin patrolling trains overnight starting on Monday. Two cops will be present on each of the roughly 150 subway trains that run between 9 p.m. and 5 a.m every night. The governor proposed the increased presence as part of her State of the State address on Tuesday.

According to the governor, the effort will cost the state \$77 million in overtime for officers over the next three months, at which point the state budget is due. If state lawmakers agree, then the state government will fund three more months of NYPD overtime costs for the extra cops – bringing the total cost to \$154 million.

Hochul was adamant that the overnight cops, along with another 750 NYPD officers flooding the system under her proposal, will not divert any police from other parts of the city or the subway. “They’re not going anywhere,” Hochul said of the 2,500 officers already assigned to patrol the subway system. “This is not taking people out who are already performing important protection services.”

Combined with the National Guard members she deployed into the subway – whom she previously admitted are purely psychological – the governor said that the state has nearly doubled the law enforcement presence underground. “People want to see police officers in the stations and on the trains,” Hochul said. She added, as she has numerous times in the past, that seeing officers makes people feel better. “I’m not going over crime statistics, it doesn’t matter,” Hochul said.

Last March, Hochul deployed 750 National Guard troops and 250 state police and Metropolitan Transportation Authority police officers into the subways. Last month, despite touting stats showing overall crime is down in the system, the governor sent in another 250 National Guard members. At the time, she confirmed that the National Guard is not allowed to arrest, detain or even touch anyone while on duty in the subways.

Earlier this month, New York City Mayor Eric Adams announced that he would also send 200 more police officers underground while similarly citing crime statistics that show that subway crime is down. However, the numbers of felony assaults and murders have increased recently, and high-profile incidents like the burning death of a sleeping woman on the train have shaken New Yorkers.

Hochul and Adams – who was not at the Thursday press conference in order to present his preliminary city budget – previously teamed up in 2022 to flood the subways with police and have the state pick up the overtime tab for 1,200 officers. The governor said that effort was a success, which is why she’s bulking up police presence again amid an uptick in certain violent crimes and unease among riders. “(Crime) went down so dramatically that we didn’t have to do it again and again,” Hochul said. “This is cyclical. The crimes are more frequent during the winter months.”

<https://www.cityandstateny.com/policy/2025/01/cops-will-start-patrolling-overnight-subways-monday/402247/>

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