

That's No Harvest Moon in the Sky, Honey.

By Polly Mann

That's a predator drone.

Those objects in the sky are what you might be seeing if you're somewhere near the Canadian or Mexican borders. They're out scouting for illegal immigrants, drug runners or terrorists. They can remain airborne for 30 hours, though missions typically run eight or nine hours. A Predator system – the plane, sensors, control consoles, and antennas – costs \$18.5 million. The operation center is contained within the ground control trailer. A pilot and sensor operator sit side by side at consoles that include four screens each, a joystick, keyboard, several levers, and rudder pedals. The pilot does the flying. The sensor operator works the equipment.

The aircraft are credited with apprehending more than 7,500 would-be immigrants since they were first deployed some six years ago. "It's like any other law enforcement platform," said Lothar Eckardt, director of the Office of Air and Marine's Predator operation at Corpus Christi, Texas. Predator drones patrol a 900-mile strip from the vicinity of Spokane, Washington, to the Lake of the Woods area of Minnesota. The U.S. Customs and Border Protection will add its sixth drone on the Southwest border when another drone is placed in Arizona. Within the United States the Houston Police Department used one in conducting a drug bust northwest of Austin.

The 30-foot ground control trailer which holds the equipment is just that – a 30-foot trailer. But you would never mistake it for your "happy camper" trailer. In connection with it are a couple of sensors that appear to be about 20 feet in diameter.

Who knows but that within a few years every metropolitan police force of any size will be able to point to its individual drone with pride as they are used to apprehend speeders, growers of marijuana, and writers of graffiti?.

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