

They're aliens... but not as we know them

A major exhibition reveals new ideas of life in space. **Robin McKie** reports

THEY have been the focus of an interstellar search that has absorbed astronomers for more than 50 years. Despite their best efforts, however, mankind has yet to detect a single piece of convincing evidence that intelligent aliens exist in our galaxy.

Now London's Science Museum has come up with a compromise solution. It is to open an exhibition that will reveal scientists' best predictions about the kinds of

extraterrestrials we might one day encounter.

'It is true some scientists believe complex life forms are rare or possibly non-existent,' said Stephen Foulger, manager for the exhibition, the 'Science of Aliens'. 'But the majority still believe they exist. The problem is that they are so distant, we simply cannot detect them. This should not stop us speculating about what kind of worlds they might live on or what

they might look like, however. And that is what we have done for the Science Museum exhibition.'

The exhibition aims to show that aliens could be

spectacularly unlike anything that has been depicted in science fiction films. These have tended to make monsters and extraterrestrials very human-like, from ET

to the monster in *Alien*. To get around this problem, scientists including the Cambridge palaeontologist, Simon Conway-Morris, picked two very different

alien landscapes – one called Aurelia; the other Blue Moon – to provide homes for their life forms. These are the focal points of the exhibition, which will open on 14 October

and will coincide with a Channel 4 series, *Alien Worlds*.

Aurelia is the planet of a red dwarf, a star much cooler than our own Sun. Only planets close to such a star could have sufficient warmth to

giant screens in the museum and visitors can control actions of the 'gulphogs' and 'skywhales' on display.

Scientists stress that, although such creatures may seem strange, they are only



Among possible life forms exhibited at the Science Museum are the stinger fan, left, gulphogs, above, native to the fictional planet Aurelia, and the skywhale, right, which makes its home on Blue Moon. Channel 4

