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Meteor lights up Midwestern sky

Scores of homes showered with rocks

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INDIANAPOLIS, Indiana (AP) -- The midnight sky flashed an eerie blue early over four Midwestern states as a meteorite exploded in the atmosphere, sending rocks as big as softballs crashing through some houses.

Residents in Illinois, Indiana, Ohio and Wisconsin reported seeing the disintegrating meteorite flash across the sky about midnight Thursday. Police were soon deluged with reports of falling rocks striking homes and cars.

Chris Zeilenga, 42, of Beecher, Illinois, said he and his wife, Pauline, were watching TV war coverage around midnight.

"The sky lit up completely from horizon to horizon. We've seen lightning storms, but this was nothing like that," he said. "A minute or so later the house started rumbling and we heard all these tiny particles hitting the house."

Outside his home about 30 miles south of Chicago, Zeilenga found tiny gray and black pieces of stone. He didn't realize their origin until he heard people talking about meteorites as he rode the morning train to work in Chicago. "When I heard that I thought, 'That's what it was!'"

Kenneth and Karen Barnes of Park Forest, Illinois, told WGN-TV in Chicago they were sleeping when a 5-pound meteorite crashed into their living room. Thursday morning their son spotted a hole in the ceiling.

"I didn't know what to think, so we went looking through the house for it and found it," Kenneth Barnes said.

Commander Mike McNamara of the Park Forest Police Department said about 60 pieces of space rock ranging from gravel-sized to softball-sized were brought in to the police station.

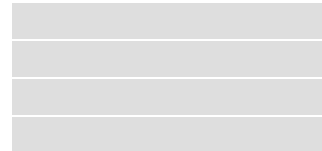
He said three homes in Park Forest were damaged, along with the fire department and possibly one car. Two homes in the nearby town of Matteson also were struck by meteorite pieces.

Paul Sipiera, a professor of geology and astronomy at Harper College in Palatine, Illinois, spent Thursday examining dozens of pieces of meteorites and plotting where



Dennis Kennedy displays a part of a meteor that hit the fire station roof in Park Forest, Illinois.

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they fell. The largest he saw was about 71/2 pounds.

He said the debris field appears to cover a path about 80 miles long by 20 miles wide from north of Bloomington, Illinois, to Chicago's south side and possibly part of northwestern Indiana.

He said all of the pieces came from a stony meteorite he estimates was about the size of a Volkswagen bug when it exploded as it plunged into Earth's atmosphere.

A spokesman for the U.S. Strategic Command in Omaha, Nebraska, said the defense installation was not tracking any manmade space objects in the area at the time that the light show appeared over the Midwest.

Sipiera said it's very rare for meteorites to fall on populated areas.

"For me, it's a dream come true," he said. "I always tell my wife that when I die, I hope I get hit in the head by a meteorite flying through the roof and it came pretty close," he said.

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


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