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KATU NEWS

March 12, 2005

Flaming object spotted in the night sky



By WILLIAM McCALL
Associated Press Writer

PORTLAND, Ore. - A fireball streaked through the night sky across the western half of the Pacific Northwest on Saturday, startling people all the way from southern Oregon to the Seattle area.

Scientists said the fireball was probably a meteor, and that it likely disintegrated just before any fragments fell into the Pacific Ocean.

Summer Jensen of Portland said she was sitting in her living room with her father when she saw the flash of light outside and rushed to see what it was.

"It was like a big ball of fire" and "behind it was a trail of blue," she said.

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"I've never seen anything like that," Jensen said, adding that the object appeared to be moving slowly.

Michael O'Connor, a duty officer at the Federal Aviation Administration's regional office in Renton, Wash., said he fielded "a whole ton of calls" from people reporting they had seen a bright streak across the sky shortly before 8 p.m.

He said police, pilots and some air traffic controllers described it as "a green ball of fire with a long tail."

O'Connor said reports came from as far east as the Tri-Cities area in Washington.

"It appears to have come down over the ocean," said Dick Pugh, with the Cascadia Meteorite Laboratory in Portland.

He said the object flew over the Pacific Coast, streaking along from south to north.

Melinda Hutson, another expert at the lab, said meteors large enough to turn into fireballs are uncommon.

To get a fireball, it has to be "a big piece of rock or metal - most are pieces of asteroids. Once every once in a while a piece of the moon or Mars breaks off," she said.

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Barometer: 29.92
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Astronomer Jim Todd, planetarium director at the Oregon Museum of Science & Industry, said that if the meteor had entered the atmosphere during the daytime, it may not even have been noticed.

"It creates a bright contrast against the night sky," Todd said.

The last time a meteor was reported striking anything on the ground in Oregon - becoming a meteorite - was in May 1981.

On March 27, 2003, more than 100 chunks of rock believed to be the remains of a meteor rained down on houses, puncturing roofs and destroying landscaping in Park Forest, Ill., a suburb south of Chicago. No one was injured.

Associated Press Writer Rukmini Callimachi contributed to this report.

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