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Search for asteroid remains unfolds



Ellen Milley with the first meteorite pieces found on Thursday in Buzzard Coulee. / Photo by Grady Semmens



Ellen Milley and Alan Hildebrand. / Photo by Grady Semmens

Several fragments, including a 13-kilogram chunk the size of the boulder, have been recovered from the asteroid that exploded over western Saskatchewan on November 20. And the ongoing search for more remains is giving researchers led by Department of Geoscience professor Alan Hildebrand more clues about the nature of the spectacular fireball after graduate student Ellen Milley spotted the first pieces in a frozen pond outside Lloydminster last Thursday afternoon.

"This being my first meteorite search, it's been really exciting and I think I had a bit of beginner's luck," Milley said. "I'm really glad I mentioned the dark spots I saw on the ice when we drove by."

As of Sunday night, more than two dozen pieces of the 10-tonne asteroid were known to be recovered by researchers or members of the public. The search is focused on a 24-square-kilometre section of agricultural land along the Battle River where the scientists calculated the debris would be located.

"I was gratified that my first prediction was close. We couldn't have done this so quickly without the eyewitnesses and security camera records, and we still need the security camera records to determine the pre-fall orbit of this asteroid," Hildebrand said.

Hildebrand and Milley have been joined by other members of the Canadian Space Agency-funded Small Bodies Discipline Working Group, including Peter Brown from the University of Western Ontario and Martin Beech from the University of Regina.

The largest meteorite found to date was a head-sized piece weighing 13-kilograms was found by Les Johnson and his son Tom who traveled to the area last week from Drayton Valley, Alberta to search for space rocks.

"It's like my dad always said: You can't catch any fish if you don't have any lines in the water," Johnson said. "It took us three days of searching and we sure were excited when we spotted this one."

The asteroid is becoming known as the Buzzard Coulee fireball, named after the picturesque valley where the first pieces were located. Hildebrand estimates that 2,000 fragments per hectare are located in the strewn field, with larger pieces expected towards the southern end of the area.

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