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Meteorite mania: 'They're going to tell their grandchildren about this'

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Meteorite hunter Terry Boudreaux, of Lake Forest, Ill., shows students at Iowa-Grant Elementary-Middle School meteorites recently near Livingston on Wednesday.

Photo by Mike DeVries/The Capital Times



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LIVINGSTON — There have been unfamiliar faces in Sue Kotte's grocery store. Jill Jentz has noticed more traffic as she delivers mail on her 93-mile mail route. And for an eighth-grade science teacher, the lesson plan has literally fallen from the sky.

The meteorites that last week pelted farm fields has this rural area along the Iowa and Grant county lines buzzing.

The Discovery Channel and CNN have been here along with researchers from the Field Museum in Chicago. On Wednesday, two meteorite hunters captivated more than 500 students during an assembly in the gymnasium at Iowa-Grant Middle and Elementary schools. They urged the excited students to keep their heads down and their eyes open, a spring ritual typically reserved in these parts for people hunting morel mushrooms.

"There's a lot of stuff out there," Terry Boudreaux, a meteorite hunter from Lake Forest, Ill., said. "I think within a year there will be a couple of surprised farmers out there."

The meteor that lit up the sky of southern Wisconsin on the evening of April 14 could be officially named this week, but only a fraction of what may have fallen to the unplanted farm fields about 60 miles west of Madison has been found.

The "strewn field" — the area in which meteor fragments fall — is estimated at one to two miles wide and at least 12 miles long, said Mike Farmer, one of the world's top meteorite hunters who was on hand for Wednesday's assembly. He said it's possible the strewn field could be as long as 25

miles and hold up to 500 pounds of meteorites, a few as large as bowling balls. As of Wednesday, only

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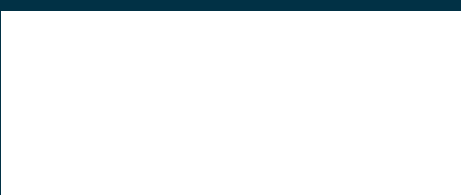
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about four pounds had been found, he said.

The educational opportunities are endless, especially for students in Iowa-Grant, who he said are at ground zero of a spectacular event.

"It's a huge deal," Farmer said. "Literally something this big and this exciting is actually only two or three times a year worldwide. Most meteorites fall in the oceans or the jungles or the Arctic."

The assembly was set into motion by one of the school's cooks. Barb Hugill's husband, Mark, found a meteorite last week on their 300-acre farm in the town of Mifflin. They sold the rock to Boudreaux for \$200 on the condition that he make a presentation at the school. Boudreaux obliged and also donated four meteorites he had collected elsewhere to the school.

"We need to instill that sense of awe and discovery in them," Hugill said of the students during a break from serving pizza dippers and hamburgers in the school lunch line. "They're going to tell their grandchildren about this. I know they are."

Ashley Liddicoat, 14 and in eighth grade, plays volleyball and softball but has been fascinated by the science project that barged onto her parent's town of Mifflin farm.

"Our road normally gets two cars a day, but people are coming from all over the state and the country," said Ashley, whose sister found a meteorite while accompanied by a crew from the Discovery Channel. "It's just cool to be talking about stuff happening at your farm. Instead of talking about stuff going on around the world, it's actually happening here in our area."

Science teacher Jade Moen had planned last week to have his students study the senses of the body but quickly altered his teaching plan. His students searched blogs and websites and began mapping the path of the meteor, which traveled from the northwest to the southeast just south of the wind turbine farm in the town of Montfort. Many of Moen's students have been searching for meteorites or live in the strewn zone.

"It's a great chance for them to learn through hands-on experience," Moen said. "It's a great way to bring the real world in (to the classroom) instead of just with textbooks."

Sue Kottke can spot the meteorite hunters almost immediately at her R&S Market in Livingston, a community of about 600 people that is home to Rural Route 1 popcorn company and also includes three bars, a spa, bank and village offices.

"That's how I know who they are: I don't know them," Kottke said.

Next door at the post office, Jill Jentz, a rural mail carrier since 1996, has never seen so much commotion on the rural roads.

"It has put us on the map," Jentz said. "People have been walking roadsides everywhere."

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Meteorite central

Some of the locations where fragments of last week's meteor were found. One expert said the field of debris could be up to 25 miles long.



State Journal



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