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U.S. NEWS | APRIL 21, 2010

These Rocks Are No Space Junk

Meteorite Hunters, Scientists Jockey to Find Specimens Potentially Worth Thousands

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By DOUGLAS BELKIN

MIFFLIN, Wis.—On the sloping edge of a cornfield, Michael Farmer is walking fast, his belly bouncing, his blue eyes sweeping the ground in front of him.

"I guarantee you there are thousands of them here," Mr. Farmer says. "You wouldn't think so because they are so spread out, but they are here."

Mr. Farmer is among hundreds of professional and amateur meteorite hunters who have converged here seeking the charred remnants of a meteor that burst through the earth's atmosphere a week ago.

Podcast

Mike Farmer describes his passion for meteorite hunting.

space just days before.

"How cool is it that you can hold something in your hand that was millions of miles on the other side of the moon three days ago," said Mr. Farmer, 38 years old, who is from Tucson, Ariz., and supports himself finding and selling meteorites.

"This is pristine," he says of the meteorites, what meteors are called once they reach the Earth's surface. "This is from the beginning of time."



Matt McLoone for The Wall Street Journal

Two meteorite fragments found in Mifflin, Wis., this week.

Their mission: to find a large meteorite, perhaps the size of a car engine, that can fetch as much as hundreds of thousands of dollars, and the possibility of touching something that had been hurtling though

As the meteor hunters spread out across a 100-square-mile patch of rolling farmlands, they often come into contact, and conflict, with each other and the scientists who have also come to study the four-billion-year-old rocks.

Meteorite collectors have been known to fork over thousands of dollars for some rare specimens found by these meteorite hunters. On his first hunting trip, Mr. Farmer found \$80,000 of meteorites, he says. Today, Mr. Farmer makes about 20% of his living finding meteorites and selling them and the other

80% brokering deals.

The hunters—who are almost all men—tend to be white, middle-aged and fascinated by space since they were boys. On Tuesday, most wore at least one item of camouflage clothing and sported week-long whiskers. All spoke longingly—and unabashedly—of the meteorites they hoped to find.

"To hold something that comes from the unknown, that's not of this earth," said Mike Bandli, a meteor hunter who manages a plant nursery in Washington. "I live for that."

The meteor that launched the frenzy broke through the earth's atmosphere last Wednesday at 10:10 p.m. local time. It was so large and moved with such velocity that it could be seen by Midwesterners from Missouri to Minnesota.



Matt McLoone for The Wall Street Journal
Professional meteorite hunter Mike Farmer scans the ground Tuesday for pieces of four-billion-year-old rocks on a farm in Mifflin, Wis.

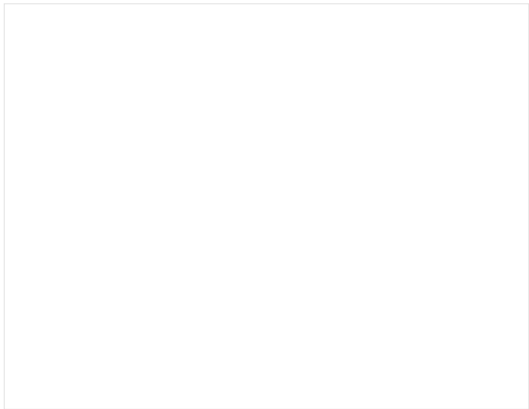
Across the tiny farm towns here in southwestern Wisconsin, the meteor blazed overhead as bright as a welder's torch, say those who saw it. Seconds later, a massive sonic boom shook the ground and rolled into a sustained, full-throated rumble.

Mr. Farmer was sitting at his computer in Tucson when the first reports flickered across his screen: "Massive meteorite shower slams into Wisconsin," he recalls one saying. He paid \$1,000 for a one-way ticket to Chicago, landed at O'Hare the next morning, jumped into a rented SUV and

drove four hours north. Before the sun had set, he was in Mifflin and the search was on.

There is as much competition as camaraderie among the hunters. Before the rocks cooled off last Wednesday night most had studied the Doppler radar imagery and adjusted for prevailing winds to try and figure out where the meteorites had landed.

To secure the best spots, the hunters paid farmers \$50 a day for sole access to their fields. The more-shrewd farmers negotiated for half of the worth of any meteors found.



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