



Sky-high drama mesmerizes Yukoners

Many Yukoners, Alaskans and northern British Columbians were rattled and mesmerized by a light in the dark morning sky at approximately 8:44.

By Whitehorse Star

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Drivers stopped their vehicles to alight and gape, and school students and staff emptied their classrooms to watch the drama.

“What you’ve seen is a very bright meteor of the class known as a fireball,” said Dr. Jeremy Tatum, a representative of Meteorites and Impact Advisory Committee to the Canadian Space Agency in Victoria. “The description of this light going through the sky, the noises that were heard to accompany it and the trail that was left behind, that’s all typical of a bright fireball.”

One witness to the meteorite described sitting in his car, perplexed by what appeared to be an instant change in the amount of daylight. And then it was dark again. But almost instantaneously, there was another flash, as though a street light had blown out. And then another, before the last in the pulsating flashes of light lit up the sky as if it was mid-day.

Looking skyward, the burning streak shot southward across the sky and disappeared as quickly as it came. It was probably a few meters in size, and travelled at 10 times the speed of sound, said Tatum. He said he did not know yet if it or any fragments of the meteorites hit the ground.

The committee will be getting satellite pictures and infra-sound records, said Tatum. “If something did land, it’s almost impossible to find unless someone actually saw it land.”

In a press release from the Yukon government, it says that reports from NAV Canada and seismic information from the Pacific Geo Science Centre indicate a suspected meteorite hit the ground near Carcross this morning.

No reports have been filed of any damage or injury, and it appears to have landed away from settled areas, says the press release. The Yukon's Emergency Measures Organization is working with Emergency Preparedness Canada, Natural Resources Canada and the RCMP to gather more information on the object.

Air traffic controller Gerry Kuhn was on duty in the Whitehorse control tower. "I was up here, and I saw it actually ... coming down through the sky down the Carcross Valley. It just lit up the whole sky," said Kuhn. He added he got reports from the Takhini Hot Springs Road and Haines Junction that the object had been seen there. "So it must have come from that direction," he said.

"(We don't know) much at this point," Doug Caldwell, an emergency communications officer, said late this morning. "I'm waiting for some other information to come in. Our main concern right now is anybody who is going to go looking for this object, whatever it may be, that they look after their own safety as a priority."

EMO officials have said the object landed somewhere in the Carcross area, near or at Caribou Mountain, and Caldwell said there are always avalanche threats and other mountain related dangers that can occur.

Cpl. Gina Nagano of the Carcross RCMP said the light pulsated. "Carcross RCMP witnessed an extraordinary bright light in the sky. It got very dark, then very bright, then it went pitch black and returned to an orange pink colour," said Nagano. "Seconds later, a massive explosion was felt, and it was rather traumatic."

Nagano added geologists are looking in the area for the object, and that she understood a helicopter was dispatched this morning. Caldwell said EMO anticipates this was a meteor.

"I'm assuming this is (a meteor). We're not going to know until somebody's got something that can show us what it is. All indicators right now are following the basic premise of being a meteorite," said Caldwell, adding that it was probably not a very big one.

A meteor is a rock, a piece of a comet or asteroid, that travels through space. It dispatches energy as it comes through the atmosphere, and that's the reason for the light meteorites cast, Caldwell explained.

“Where we’re at astronomy wise, the planet is orbiting right now through a known belt of debris,” he added. “January 4 (was) the largest meteor shower of the year.”

If the meteorite landed, it would have burned up all of the hot material on the way, and would have been cold when it hit the ground, Tatum explained.

“People see meteorites in the sky almost every night,” said Doug Davidge, an environmental assessment officer with Environment Canada. He added they were trying to figure out where the object landed, if it did in fact hit the ground.

Davidge explained the loud noise heard seconds after it passed over could mean either that it hit the ground or it could simply be the noise the object made as it passed through the air.

A smoke trail similar to contrails left by passenger jets, but much more colourful and mystic, could be seen in the sky for many minutes after the object passed over.

The light from the fireball was also seen in Atlin, B.C., said RCMP Cpl. Mike Stewart, who heard the noise it made.

“This is the second one we’ve had in a week here reported to us.... We had a report on the 11th (of January) at 4 a.m. Some people south of Atlin, about 30 km, they reported a very similar thing as you’re hearing this morning,” said Stewart. “They saw the tail of a meteorite, a big flash. Then they heard a big crash, a ‘boom’ and then it shook their cabin,” said Stewart.

Martin Jasek is one of Yukon’s UFO investigators. Although he didn’t see the object personally, he said he had gotten reports of it. “(This is) fairly common. There was a similar one that was seen by six people in December 1998. That was later at night, so not as many people saw it,” said Jasek.

That meteor was seen all the way from Lake Laberge to Whitehorse, heading in more or less the same north—to—south direction as this one was. Jasek said that often meteors simply vaporise before they hit the ground, but if they do crash, they can cause damage.

Caldwell stressed that if people are going to look for the object, they should let someone know where they’re going; go with another person; and be prepared for the winter conditions.

Answer the following questions with information from the article.

1. What are three signs that are typical of a 'bright fireball' or a meteor, like the one that flew over Whitehorse?

2. How big was the meteor and how fast was it going?

3. Where do EMO officials think the meteor landed?

4. What is a meteor a part of?

5. Besides Whitehorse, list at least two other communities that witnessed the fireball.

6. What direction was the meteor travelling?
