

Meteor showers in Asia disappoint

November 18 2009



Schoolchildren covered with a blanket sit outside to try to watch Leonid meteors shower at Sonipat, 60 kilometers (37.5 miles) from New Delhi, India, Wednesday, Nov. 18, 2009. (AP Photo/Manish Swarup)

(AP) -- Thousands of stargazers across Asia stayed awake overnight to catch a glimpse of what was advertised as an intense Leonid meteor shower, but the show fizzled rather than sizzled for many because of cloudy conditions.

One group of about 30 amateur Indian [astronomers](#) saw the meteors light up the sky at the Siriska wildlife sanctuary, about 95 miles (150 kilometers) south of New Delhi - counting 78 during a four-hour period.

"There was no moon in the sky, which is good for observation," said Yogeshwar Kanu Aggarwal, a member of the Space Science Popularization Association of Communications and Educators. "We could see flashes of light for almost 10 seconds."

Leonid meteors are bits of debris from the Comet Tempel-Tuttle and were named after the [constellation Leo](#), from which they appear to originate. NASA scientists had projected there would be up to 300 raining down every hour, compared to a typical night when there are about eight an hour.

Night owls in Manila, however, were left staring at the lights of passing airplanes because of cloudy conditions. More than 1,000 Thais who camped out in a parking lot on the outskirts of Bangkok had better luck, spotting 52 over several hours.

"The sky was clear and there were many meteors around 4 a.m.," said Suranand Supawannakij, director of the Science Center for Education in Rangsit, about 25 miles (40 kilometers) north of Bangkok. "They came from many directions. I am always excited seeing a [meteor shower](#)."

The Leonid meteors travel at 156,000 miles (251,000 kilometers) per hour. They consist mostly of dust and ice, and evaporate long before they reach the ground, so "you can go outside and watch the [Leonid meteor shower](#) without worrying about getting whacked on the head," said scientist Bill Cooke of NASA's [Meteoroid](#) Environment Office.

When a Leonid meteor storm was first observed in 1833, Cooke said it must have seemed like something out of the apocalyptic saga "2012." More than 30,000 meteors an hour rained down on an unsuspecting public, sparking panic and fears of the end of the world, he said.

"They were seeing 10 meteors per second all over the sky," he said. "You read newspaper accounts and robbers were returning what they stole because they wanted to be right with God. People were praying in churches, in their yards."

This time around, the meteor shower was greeted with the oohs and ahhs

that one hears at fireworks displays rather than screeches of fear.

"I've seen meteors before but this was different," said Akgradech Lekkla, a 39-year-old taxi driver who joined several whiskey-drinking Thais in Ayutthaya, about 30 miles (50 kilometers) from Bangkok.

"It looked like it was raining meteors," he said. "They came in so quick that if you didn't pay attention you missed them."

In [India](#), a cloudy sky disappointed thousands of stargazers in Agra, home of the Taj Mahal. Pawan Sharma, a 36-year-old photographer, could only spot meteors, one of them big enough to be seen streaking across the sky in a window between the clouds.

"It was a momentary thing. It was so disappointing," he said.

In Nepal, cloud and fog cover over much of the Himalayan nation blocked views of the meteors.

Jayanta Acharya, astronomy professor at Katmandu's Tribhuvan University, said he woke up early to view the meteor shower from the rooftop of his house.

"It was a big event for us and we are all disappointed to have missed it," Acharya said.

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