

'Amazing' meteor dazzles stargazers across Midwest

April 13 2012, By Andy Grimm and Erin Meyer

In a few days - barring cloud cover - the night skies will present one of the more arresting displays of meteors streaking through space.

Known as the [Lyrids](#), the shower of light has appeared in mid-April for about 2,600 years. When the [meteors](#) peak in the wee hours of April 21 and before dawn April 22, as many as 100 of them an hour will arc across the sky.

As brilliant as these showers may be, they're not likely to match the bright green light that prompted hundreds of people from Illinois, Wisconsin, Michigan and Iowa to light up online bulletin boards Wednesday night with rave reviews of a shooting star.

It's probably safe to say interest in the Lyrids - and in the upcoming prime stargazing season - is building after the meteor burned brighter and longer than most others.

"That would be a big plus," said Dan Joyce, an astronomer at Triton College in River Grove, Ill., and a member of the Chicago Astronomical Society. "Not enough people look at the sky."

A large telescope loaded in the back of his Mazda, Joyce was headed to the Green River Conservation Area with a fellow stargazing enthusiast when the meteor burned through the darkness for 10 or more glorious seconds.

"I've seen pretty bright meteors ... but nothing like this one," said Joyce, 64, adding that he's witnessed tens of thousands of such displays. "It was amazing."

What he and his friend saw about 8:20 p.m. Wednesday stunned them into silence and finished off with a memorable grand finale.

"It was ripping along," said Joyce, who saw the light show near Shabbona. Then, "it just blew up. We saw the whole shot."

The consensus of those who weighed in on online bulletin boards: they'd never witnessed any this brilliant.

"Glittering sparkly tail like a 4th of July (sparkler)" one person from Wisconsin wrote at the [lunarmeteoritehunters](#) blog. "I have seen (many) [shooting stars](#) but NOTHING like this."

"Brightest I have ever seen," wrote a poster from Crystal Lake, Ill.

"It lasted only 12 sec but it was a sight to see truly amazing," a sky watcher from North Chicago stated.

About 50 miles southeast of Joyce's observation, Kandy Borneman of Morris, Ill., said she was driving west on a country road while talking on a cellphone to her sister.

"I'm like, 'Oh my goodness you won't believe what I am seeing,' " said Borneman. "It looked like fireworks. It kept going and going."

And in Lake Zurich, Ill., Matt Mottier nearly fell off his couch while watching TV when the meteor flashed in his periphery.

"It seemed like a movie meteor," Mottier said. "By the time I craned my

neck around, it was gone. I have seen a few in my life, but they were nothing like this."

Astronomers said the meteor was rare.

Paul Sipiera is adjunct curator at Field Museum's Pritzker Center for Meteorites and Polar Studies and president of the Planetary Studies Foundation. He said he's seen versions that brilliant about four times in the half-century he has studied the heavens.

Other experts said meteors the size of Wednesday night's might be seen from a given point about every two years.

The last time a detectable meteor fell to Earth in this part of the country, becoming a meteorite, was almost exactly two years ago in southwest Wisconsin near the town of Livingston. It shattered into thousands of pieces, a few of which were recovered and sold.

The typical meteors seen on a country road at night are the size of grains of sand. The one Wednesday probably was too small - perhaps 1 foot in diameter - to yield pieces, experts said.

Meteors generally must measure about 6 feet in diameter to arrive in detectable pieces through their very hot journey to earth, said Philipp R. Heck, assistant curator at Field's Pritzker Center.

He added that the Field wasn't planning a search party and didn't expect other meteorite seekers to head out in search of pieces.

A rooftop camera in Madison, Wis., caught video images of the meteor.

Sipiera, Heck and Mark Hammergren, an [astronomer](#) at Adler Planetarium, have seen thousands of meteors and studied them for

decades. They said Wednesday's meteor probably was random and spontaneous, unrelated to the Lyrids.

"It more than likely was a chunk of an asteroid that was in the same place at the same time as the Earth and we both ran into each other," Hammergren said.

Sipiera ventured that the brilliant green color might indicate the meteor was carbonaceous chondrite, which has no equivalent on earth and is probably a distant cousin to coal.

Like many people, the astronomers were caught off guard by the meteor's appearance. None of them witnessed it.

Sipiera was pulling up to an Algonquin, Ill., bar to meet a friend. Heck was picking up his 1-year-old son's toys in his Chicago apartment and Hammergren was covering herb plants in his Evanston, Ill., yard.

"I've been kicking myself," Hammergren said.

Joked Sipiera: "It's a good thing I don't have to make a living following these things."

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