

2012 noctilucent cloud season begins

June 19 2012, By Dr. Tony Phillips and Holly Zell



Flying photographer Brian Whittaker photographed these NLCs over Canada on June 13, 2012. Credit: Brian Whittaker.

(Phys.org) -- Data from NASA's AIM spacecraft show that noctilucent clouds (NLCs) are like a great "geophysical light bulb". They turn on every year in late spring, reaching almost full intensity over a period of no more than 5 to 10 days--and the bulb is glowing. "They were visible to the north for about 3 hours as we flew between Ottawa and Newfoundland at 35,000 feet" said Brian Whittaker.

These electric-blue ice clouds hang 53 miles (85 km) above Earth's surface, at the edge of space itself, circling the north and south pole regions. Their origin is still largely a mystery; various theories associate

them with meteoric dust, rocket exhaust, global warming--or some mixture of the three.

Observing tips: NLCs favor [high latitudes](#) during the summer months, although they have been sighted as far south as Colorado and Virginia. Look west 30 to 60 minutes after sunset when the Sun has dipped 6-16 degrees below the horizon. If you see luminous blue-white tendrils spreading across the sky, you may have spotted a noctilucent cloud.

Provided by NASA

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