

Fireballs spotted over western US as Chinese rocket burns up (Update)

February 24 2015, by Lindsay Whitehurst



This Monday, Feb. 23, 2015, ten second time exposure photo provided by Neil Zeller, shows a streak of light from what is believed to be a Chinese rocket burning up upon re-entry, in the atmosphere as seen from Calgary, Canada. People from Arizona to Canada have reported seeing bright lights in the sky as the Chinese rocket burned up in the atmosphere. Witnesses described the lights as a group of about three dozen fireballs moving slowly from south to north late Monday. (AP Photo/ Neil Zeller)

(AP)—People across a wide swath of the West, from Arizona to Canada,

looked up at the sky late Monday to see a cluster of weird lights followed by an orange tail streaking across the night.

The lights were not a meteor, but a Chinese rocket booster that broke apart, said Maj. Martin O'Donnell, a spokesman for U.S. Strategic Command.

There were no reports of damage or injuries, O'Donnell said, pointing to statistics showing there is a 1 in a trillion chance of being hit by space debris.

Canadian photographer Neil Zeller was on his way home from shooting the Northern Lights when he saw the cluster of fireballs in a rural area outside of Calgary about 11 p.m. MST.

"I'd never seen anything like it," he said. He captured several shots of an orange streak slashed above dark trees.

More than 150 people reported seeing the group of about three dozen fireballs, said Mike Hankey with the American Meteor Society.

It lingered in the sky for more than a minute, showing slow movement that is a sure sign of a man-made object re-entering from space, he said. Naturally occurring meteors last just a few seconds.

"It was pretty significant—over 150 reports is a lot. It covered a real wide range," Hankey said.

The reports came from nine Western states as well as Alberta and British Columbia in Canada.

Zeller, a freelance photographer, said he first thought it might be a plane crashing, and then was reminded of the 1986 Challenger explosion. He

was relieved when he discovered it was a rocket booster.



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The rocket that launched a satellite on Dec. 27, wasn't abnormally large, said O'Donnell. Angle of re-entry and weather conditions can make space objects look brighter from earth.

Matthew Hepworth, a video producer, said he was driving south of Salt Lake City when he saw very bright orange lights that looked like a searchlight at first. He captured the bright streak on his dash-cam, an

investment he made because of the meteor footage caught by such cameras in Russia in 2013.



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Utah-based NASA ambassador Patrick Wiggins said most such events go unnoticed.

"There are literally thousands of satellites orbiting the earth and these things fall out of the sky all of the time," he said. "This one just

happened to be passing over some fairly large metropolitan areas and it did it at night."

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