

Chinese rocket sends streak of light across Western US sky (Update)

July 28 2016

A Chinese rocket body streaking across the night sky over the Western United States lit up social media as people shared photos and video of the bright object.

The Chinese CZ-7 re-entered the atmosphere Wednesday night, U.S. Strategic Command spokeswoman Julie Ziegenhorn confirmed. That's when people in Nevada, Utah and California took to social media to report a small fireball streaking across the sky.

Photographer Ian Norman was taking pictures of the night sky with friends in Alabama Hills, California, near the eastern Sierra Nevada, when he saw the light and started recording, thinking the flash was a meteor.

"It was really strange to see something that bright," he said Thursday. "I thought it was just a really big meteor, but it was so slow-moving, I had never seen anything like that."

The former SpaceX engineer heads out a few nights every month, but it was the first re-entry he's seen.

"It was a cool experience, it was beautiful to see it going across the sky," Norman said.

Further east in Utah, Matt Holt was outside a public library in Provo amid a large group playing "Pokemon Go" when he noticed the bright,

colorful flash of light. Soon, others spotted it, too.

"I didn't know what I was seeing because I've never seen space debris," said Holt, a student at Brigham Young University. "It looked kind of like a meteor, but it was going much slower."

Holt said it lasted for about a minute. He later learned that the flash was a Chinese rocket, but it was mysterious at the time.

"I didn't feel afraid. I was excited. I was in awe at the science of space," he said Thursday.

The rocket took off June 25 from China's Wenchang Satellite Launch Center, according to the website of the Aerospace Corp., which provides research-and-development and advisory services to the U.S. Air Force and the National Reconnaissance Office, among others.

In announcing the launch of the new-generation rocket, China said it marked a milestone in its space program, keeping it on schedule to place its second space station into orbit this year.

Rockets heading to orbit shed components that fall back to Earth. Components that fall back from space at high speed heat up due to friction with the atmosphere and break up as increasing density causes a rapid slowdown. But some pieces may survive.

Of 27 previous re-entries this year, witnesses reported seeing five, according to the Aerospace Corp. website.

The most recent was the body of a Russian rocket launched in mid-July from Baikonur cosmodrome. People on New Zealand's South Island spotted the re-entry several days later.

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