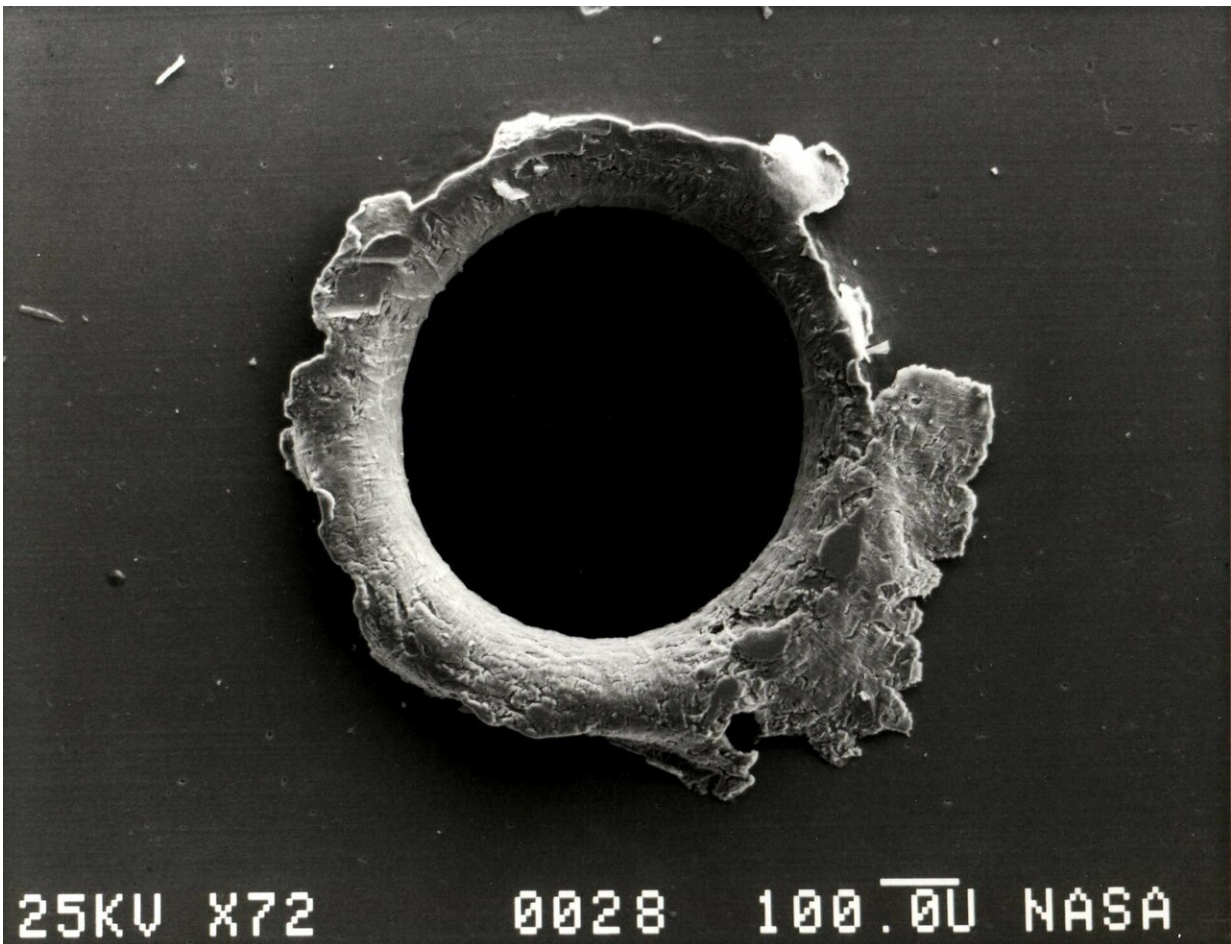


Orange fireball lighting Florida sky was Chinese space junk

July 3 2019, by Kelli Kennedy



Credit: CC0 Public Domain

Conspiracy theorists took to social media in a flurry of excitement

Wednesday after a mysterious flying object resembling an orange fireball streaked across the Florida sky.

The American Meteor Society reported two dozen sightings from Jacksonville to Key West after midnight and tweeted there's "no real explanation yet."

Even the Palm Beach County Sheriff's Office joined in on the fun after receiving reports about the mysterious lights, posting on social media that "we were not invaded last night by Martians, but we appreciate the level of confidence you have of us to stop intergalactic invaders."

Astrophysicist Jonathan McDowell at the Center for Astrophysics has a more logical explanation for the unusual flashes of light, with a not-so blockbuster finale. He said they were just pieces of a Chinese rocket as it re-entered the Earth's atmosphere.

Launched in January, the rocket weighed over two tons and was roughly 30 feet (9 meters) long. He said it helped put a Chinese military communication satellite in orbit, and like most space junk, was being tracked as it circled the planet.

"The stuff is moving slowly. It's breaking up into multiple pieces. It's sort of a classic space debris break-up," he told The Associated Press.

The time and location from videos posted on social media made it easy to compare with the orbital data about what debris was slated for reentry around that time.

McDowell said reentries' like this are fairly common and happen about once a month, but they don't often "happen at night over the United States where lots of people see it, so that's what was unusual."

One 911 caller gasped that it was the biggest thing he'd ever seen in the sky, telling the operator he was walking out of a doughnut shop in Lantana when he saw the fireball separate into two parts in a burst of flames and sparkles.

"I don't know if it was as plane crash or a comet or a shooting star or what, but something came down out of the sky in a fireball," said the unidentified man in a call provided by the Palm Beach County Sheriff's Office.

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