

'Southern Lights' Play Unearthly Tricks — Red Clouds Startle

Associated Press

Weathermen and astronomers had conflicting explanations for the cloud-like red glow that lit up the evening sky from California to Louisiana, but there was one thing they were agreed on: It wasn't the space shuttle streaking around the Earth.

Skygazers whose calls flooded police stations and radio stations reported seeing the display of red lights Sunday night across vast sections of the West, Midwest and South from California to Tennessee and from South Dakota to Louisiana.

"It got so bright here that you could drive your car without the headlights on. It's unreal," said Tim Curtis, 17, of Sullivan, Mo. "We thought it was a gas or the Second Coming of Christ or the space shuttle crashing."

The space shuttle Columbia was launched from Cape Canaveral in Florida early Sunday and was orbiting Earth when the lights were sighted, but experts discounted the possibility that the shuttle might have caused the glow.

National Weather Service meteorologists in St. Louis and Dr. Arnold M. Heiser, an astronomer in Nashville, Tenn., diagnosed the rash in the sky as northern lights that were visible extraordinarily far south.

Northern lights, or aurora

borealis, are rarely seen south of the Canadian border, meteorologists say.

"It's a little unusual to have them this far down here, but we're in a period of very high-energy sunspots," Dr. Heiser said. Northern lights are caused by the interaction of particles from the sun and the Earth's magnetic field.

Walter Hight, an official at the Arkansas Office of Emergency Services, said the lights may have been reflected south by dust and haze in the air.

But a meteorologist in Washington had a different explanation.

Col. Dave Torshia, staff meteorologist at McChord Air Force Base near Tacoma, Wash., said the lights weren't aurora borealis because aurora borealis doesn't travel east to west as the lights did Sunday night.

He said it was likely the glow was an optical illusion called a "noctilucent" cloud formation created by the sun reflecting off cosmic dust at an altitude of 265,000 feet. He said the illusion moves from east to west because it follows the setting sun.

John Northrip, a physics professor at Southwest Missouri State University in Springfield, Mo., also said he

Skygazers

believed the source of the light was a noctilucent cloud. A noctilucent cloud is a luminous cloud visible at night, especially in polar regions.

Whatever the source, the light display delighted earthlings.

Curtis said he was at a church gathering with several other people in his hometown when the lights began.

"When it started out, it was a big red flash in the east going super-fast, and from there it started to spread and get bigger and bigger," Curtis said.

Judy Smith, a communications operator at a Riverside County, Calif., sheriff's substation, said, "We had some people who thought the end was near or the Martians were coming."

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Northern Lights reportedly viewed in rare southern visit

By MARK WINIARSKI
Post Reporter

The Northern Lights — the Aurora Borealis — apparently made a rare southern visit Sunday evening, with a red glow in the sky delighting and mystifying area residents and Texans from Fort Worth to Fort Davis.

The Montgomery County sheriff's office received about a dozen calls from Conroe-area residents concerning a glow about 10 p.m., according to a dispatcher.

The department notified a local fire department, fearing a forest fire, the dispatcher said.

Tom Perry, 26, the dispatcher and jailer for the Grimes County Sheriff's Department in Anderson, said he has lived in the area all his life and it is the first time he has seen such a thing. Perry said the lights looked "like a big red cloud with three or four beams of light going down to the ground."

"Almost all our officers saw it and we received several telephone calls about it," he said.

In West Texas, a University of Chicago astronomer observed a "quite bright" display from the McDonald Observatory at Fort Davis.

Lewis Hobbs, who said he had seen the Northern Lights hundreds of times in Wisconsin, said this was his first Texas display in 14 years of visiting.

The lights are generally seen in the extreme northern or southern latitudes, he said.

Hobbs explained that the red lights are caused by charged particles, emitted by the sun, hitting oxygen atoms.

The sun-charged particles get trapped in the Earth's magnetic field, he said. They circulate in the field and when the field gets overcharged, the charges hit the oxygen atoms. The excited oxygen emits a reddish, shimmering glow.

The National Weather Service said the glow was reported by startled residents in Oregon, California, eastern Kansas, Missouri, Illinois, and from Tennessee to Nebraska. There were also sightings in New Mexico, Oklahoma and as far south and east as Louisiana and Florida.