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Some saw meteor, others saw . . . ?

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Of the Register-Guard

Speaking of meteors, and other things that glow bright in the night . . .

"I was coming home from downtown when I saw it," says Al Cole, a retiree who lives in Eugene. "That fireball was the most beautiful thing I've ever seen in my life, and I've seen a lot of them."

A fiery object that seared the darkened Eugene skies at about 10 p.m. Wednesday fits the description of meteor — or fireball — say people who saw it, and also people who know things about meteors. Still unexplained, however, were two bright orange lights seen at about 11 p.m. that night by Dave Lauinger and a friend, who were atop Skinner Butte, and by another couple in downtown Eugene.

It was at 11 p.m. Wednesday when Twyla Sauers, director of the Eugene School District's native American program, finished year-end tasks at the administrative building on Monroe Street. She and her husband walked out to their car and first noticed a "bright star — like the picture postcards of the star of Bethlehem," Sauers says. They were driving away when they saw two "bright, vivid orange lights" moving slowly and steadily across the sky, about as high as a small plane might fly. "But you could tell they weren't from an airplane," she says.

"I work for the Eugene district and my husband works for Bethel, and we regard ourselves as really steady individuals,"

Sauers says. "If I'd have known at the time I might have been seeing an unidentified object, I'd have been thrilled."

Well, those who saw the 10 p.m. fireball were thrilled, even if it was identifiable.

"They're usually brilliant, bright green like this one," says Cole, who used to build "perfect mirrors" for telescopes, "but the size was the thing that caught me this time. It was big. And then there was this long tail that stretched out behind it — it must have been 100 miles long. A long yellowish deal and it looked like you could see little particles drop out of it. It was so big and bright that after it went out of sight, I almost expected to hear the boom."

Bill Suggs, director of the Lane Education Service District Planetarium at 2300 Centennial Blvd., didn't see the alleged fireball, but says it sounds like "a very large meteor."

As it happens, a special meteor program is in progress at the planetarium, with shows at 3 p.m. Saturday and Sunday.

"By 'very large,' I mean in comparison with other meteors. Most you see in the night sky are really not much larger than the tip of your finger. What you're seeing is very, very hot ionized gas around it."

A meteoroid the size of driveway gravel will get an 18- to 20-foot ball of glowing gas around it, Suggs says. A larger one easily could have a tail that stretched 60 to 80 miles long. The large ones also tend to be seen much lower on the horizon, just as this one was.

The colors are caused in part by the chemical composition of the meteoroid, and in part by its speed, and angle of entry. A slow meteoroid will create a reddish meteor trail. Extremely fast ones will be yellow or white. Green is caused by chemicals, blue is a product of speed.

The largest meteorite ever found in Oregon was discovered in Oregon City in 1902. Although the meteorite itself was shipped off to the American Museum of Natural History in New York, a "full-size copy" rests on the porch of the planetarium here.