

Meteorite blazes its light over swath of North Slope

By SHEILA TOOMEY
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For three seconds Tuesday night, a flash of brilliant yellow lit the sky along a 200-mile arc from Deadhorse to the Colville River.

In that blinding moment, the Brooks Range, long hidden by winter darkness, burst into view, astonishing a man three miles away.

"I've never experienced anything like it in my life," said Bill Brawley, a forklift operator for Geophysical Services Inc. in Umiat. "It

was an enormous flash. For just a second, it was like pure daylight. I wouldn't even attempt to guess what caused it."

To pilot Dave Millard, at the controls of a plane headed toward Umiat at 6,000 feet, the sudden light was "like a big flash cube going off above me" that lit the whole North Slope including an airborne plane 100 miles away.

At 22,000 feet, pilot Joe Burroughs could see both the flash and its cause — a meteo-

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rite, exploding as it crashed through the earth's atmosphere at speeds in excess of six miles a second.

"You could see the entire North Slope," Burroughs said. "It lasted about three to five seconds. Then it was just like someone clicked the light off."

"My first thought was that it was the remainder of the Soviet satellite, but it was too big for that."

About eight or 10 meteorites are pulled by gravity into the earth's atmosphere each year, according to Neal Brown of the Geophysical Institute at the University of Alaska, Fairbanks. That doesn't include the several tons of meteorite dust that fall to earth each day, he said.

The last meteorite reported in Alaska was more than three years ago.

"What they saw was probably not much bigger than a golf ball," Brown said, a solid chunk of nickel and iron sucked by gravity from a belt of space debris — more properly called an asteroid belt — that orbits the sun.

When the speeding missile hit the gases in the earth's atmosphere, it excited them into flame. Thus, the "explosion without any sound" that



Brawley experienced.

Usually the meteor itself melts away — vaporizes, Brown said. But Burroughs, who was co-piloting an Alaska International Air cargo flight from Fairbanks to the Mead River village of Atkasook, thinks the space traveler might have survived the normally fatal plunge to earth.

"I saw the streak," he said. "When it hit the atmosphere, you could almost see the object itself leaving a long trail behind. It didn't look like it blew up."

Burroughs said the meteorite appeared to land from 50 to 75 miles away and looked "as big as a house."

Several witnesses to the cosmic event thought they were seeing a comet. But comets don't fall, Brown said. They stay in the sky, in orbit around the sun. A comet is an ice ball, trailing a tail of water vapor that glows not from fire, but from reflected sunlight.