

Huge fireball streaks through N.W. skies

VANCOUVER, British Columbia (AP) — A fireball as bright as the moon streaked across the nighttime sky and exploded above southwestern British Columbia and northern Washington state, an astronomer here said.

The Washington State Patrol office in the Bellingham-Everett area received a few telephone calls from people who believed they had seen a UFO after the fireball appeared around 9 p.m. Tuesday, said Dean Munday, a patrol spokesman.

"We looked up towards the Big Dipper and we saw this brilliant magnesium-blue flare-like object streak out of the southeast sky, out of the constellation of Leo, the lion, and pass directly underneath the bowl of the Big Dipper," said astronomer David Dodge of the Southam Observatory.

"As it did, it blew up before our eyes, leaving behind a short-duration red train of light, and there were all kinds of sparkles coming off it, too. It was really, really brilliant."

Dodge said an exploding fireball occurs when a sizable rock smashes into the atmosphere and the friction creates intense heat and light. Known technically as a bolide, an exploding fireball is brighter and more active than a meteor.

Dodge said he doubted that any of the object reached the ground.

"After whooping and hollering for a few seconds, we just shut up completely, hoping to hear any kind of sonic boom, and there was none," he said.

"A boom is a bit of a giveaway. If you've got a boom then it's gotten down into denser atmosphere and it may have survived the plunge, but we heard nothing so it extinguished well up in the atmosphere."

Police received no reports of pieces of molten rock falling from the sky.