

'Spectacular' show lights the heavens

Experts disagree on mysterious glow

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A mysterious light show that flashed across the night sky east of the Mississippi sparked earthbound debate Wednesday with few able to agree on what caused it.

It was described as everything from a pinpoint to a moving spiral to a glowing cloud to "a big ball of fire," although astronomers said it probably was related to the annual Perseids meteor shower.

"It was the scariest thing I ever saw, but it was pretty, all white," said Brenda Newton of Rochester, N.Y., who saw the light about 10 p.m. Tuesday when she and her parents went looking for a place to watch the annual meteor shower.

She thought she saw a meteor, but "then it started to get bigger and it had a tail. By the time we got out of the truck, it had begun to spiral. It lasted for a few minutes, then became like a dim star and floated toward the west."

"It was definitely not a meteor," said Denise Sabatini, vice president of the Syracuse, N.Y., Astronomical Society. "Meteors burn off after seconds. This lasted five to seven minutes. It was really quite spectacular."

Teena Jones, planetarium education coordinator at the Cincinnati Museum of Natural History, said observers there believed the object was man-made.

"Two of our people actually saw

it. They had a telescope trained on it," Jones said, explaining that two museum staffers were in Adams County stargazing Tuesday night. "Their best guess was a barium cloud release," she said, referring to the clouds intentionally released for atmospheric testing by the National Aeronautics and Space Administration and other groups.

But workers at Cape Canaveral, Fla., the North American Aerospace Defense Command in Colorado Springs, Colo., and the NASA facility at Wallops Island, Va., said there were no launches Tuesday.

Others thought it might be a satellite breaking up.

"We didn't show any scheduled space objects to re-enter the atmosphere at that date and time and location. Right now that's all we have on it," said Capt. Sigmund Adams, of the Aerospace Defense Command, which tracks satellites.

At Ohio's Bowling Green State University, physics and astronomy Professor Ronald Stoner said he suspected the display was caused by the Perseids meteor shower.

"It is caused by little bits and pieces of dust from the comet. They're very small," he said. "If there were a larger piece, and an icy piece of material, something about the size of a snowflake, it might well cause something like this. It would vaporize and leave a glowing cloud behind it."

Ron Schaffner
P.O. Box 335
Loveland, Ohio
45140