

High-Flying Object Zips Past Delta Jet

CHARLESTON, W.Va. (AP) — National Weather Service forecasters doubt that it was theirs, and Defense Department officials insist that it wasn't theirs. About the only thing the Federal Aviation Administration can say about it — an object that encountered a Delta Air Lines jet at 29,500 feet — is that no one is likely to find it.

The pilot of Delta Flight 1083 told investigators that an object that appeared to be a missile had seemed to be heading straight for his Boeing 737 on Thursday morning before it passed to the side and slightly below. The flight was on its way from Pittsburgh to Atlanta.

"The pilot described it as a rocket or a missile about 4 feet long, with fins that were each about a foot or a foot and a half in height," said Delta spokesman Bill Berry.

"He saw it. It was there. It was

gone."

The FAA said Friday that it probably would never know what had the close encounter with the jet, which was carrying 60 people. The plane was at 29,500 feet and 31 miles northeast of Charleston at the time of the incident.

"It may have been a blimp-shaped helium balloon," said Kathleen Bergen, a spokesman for the FAA's regional headquarters in New York. "It's unlikely we'll ever find it, for a lot of reasons."

For one reason, the prospect of finding a 4-foot-long object somewhere in the hills and woods of West Virginia is remote.

The pilot, whose name was withheld, told investigators that the object had been moving north at high speed. Bergen said the pilot had reported seeing no exhaust.

The National Weather Service

said that the jet stream, a fast current of air at high altitudes, was not crossing West Virginia at the time of the encounter and that wind in the area had been too weak to make an unpowered object, such as a balloon, move fast.

Maj. Larry Icenogle, a spokesman for the Pentagon, said that while other agencies were dealing in speculation, he could offer one fact: "The Defense Department had nothing going on yesterday that would have anything to do with that."

Bergen said that left the FAA with two explanations: The official one is that the object was a promotional balloon that escaped. She said she preferred not to talk about the other option.

"Balloons can travel pretty far," she said. "We don't acknowledge the existence of UFOs."