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Mystery object has close encounter with plane

CHARLESTON, W.Va. (AP) — The National Weather Service doubts it was theirs and the Defense Department insists it wasn't theirs. About the only thing the Federal Aviation Administration can say about the 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, en route from Pittsburgh to Atlanta, told investigators an object that appeared to be a missile seemed headed straight for his Boeing 737 on Thursday morning before passing to the side and slightly below.

"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. "It went so fast that's all he saw. He didn't see it long enough to recognize any markings.

"He saw it. It was there. It was gone."

The FAA said yesterday it will probably never know what had the close encounter with the jet, carrying 60 people 31 miles northeast of Charleston.

"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 isn't good.

The pilot, whose name was not released, told investigators the object was moving north at high speed.

The National Weather Service said the jet stream, a fast current of air at high altitudes, was not crossing West Virginia at the time of the encounter and

wind in the area was not strong enough to make an unpowered object like a balloon move fast.

The weather service sends up observation balloons each morning and afternoon. But the time for Thursday's launch was 25 minutes before the encounter, and the nearest launching station is Huntington, about 50 miles west of Charleston, said Jim Harrison, a weather service meteorologist at Huntington.

In summer, the balloons generally climb to 100,000 feet before exploding and lowering weather instruments to the ground by parachute, but "I can't imagine a pilot not recognizing one," if that's what it was, he said.

Maj. Larry Icenogle, a spokesman for the Pentagon, said, "The Defense Department had nothing going on yesterday that would have anything to do with that."

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