

# Re-entry of Soviet rocket sparks a flood of calls to U.S. authorities

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People from Montana to Mississippi reported vivid streaks of light in the night sky when a disintegrating rocket used to launch a Soviet satellite burned up in the atmosphere, putting on a fireworks show with "spectacular, beautiful colors."

Scores of startled people called police, the news media and air traffic controllers to report the phenomenon late Saturday.

"We weren't really scared. If it had landed, it would have been a different story," said Joe Beverly, a policeman at Marion, Ky., who saw reddish-orange lights while driving with his family.

The light show was caused by the re-entry of a Soviet rocket body that had been used to launch the Raduga 21 communications satellite on Thursday, said Maj. Alex Mondragon of the U.S. Space Command in Colorado Springs, Colo.

"Something re-entering like that can be mistaken for a missile coming in" but the space command knew it wasn't because it had tracked the object since launch, Mondragon said. The agency uses a network of radar, telescopes and sensors to track about 7,000 man-made objects in orbit, he said.

Trackers spotted the falling rocket over the coast of western Canada and followed its southeastward course across the United States past the Florida Gulf Coast, Mondragon said.

"There were some initial indications that debris may have landed, but nobody has found anything," Mondragon

said Sunday. "Realistically, we would have received a report by now if anything had hit the Earth."

He said the likelihood of finding any debris is "fairly remote. Only 5 percent or less of a space object typically survives re-entry."

"I've never seen anything like it. It was spectacular, beautiful colors," said Paul Kellenbarger of Pea Ridge, Ark., who ran outside with his wife to watch. "It looked like a helicopter, with red and green lights."

Some callers to WPSD-TV in Paducah, Ky., reported blue lights while others reported reddish-orange hues and white lights. Sam Burrage, executive producer and anchorman at WPSD, said the station received 25 to 35 calls about the lights from viewers in western Kentucky, southeastern Missouri and northern Tennessee.

Some callers reported seeing more than one object flaming across the sky.

"They say it was two main lights, a reddish orange color," said Bart Ryan of KBLT radio near Galena, Kan.

"I've had about 30 calls up here about it," said Todd Glaese, an air traffic controller at the Fayetteville, Ark., airport. "It was something to see, and I had a good view."

"They had tails of fire, traveling from west to east . . . they lit up part of the ground," said Steve Matt, an Arkansas Game and Fish Commission officer.

Tom DeMont of Siloam Springs, Ark., said he saw two sets of lights, "maybe 100 feet long, twin sets of light."

"We had about 30 people out Christmas caroling, and we saw these lights going across the sky. I thought they

were three jet planes flying in formation with their lights on, but there was no sound," said Lincoln-Lancaster County (Neb.) Planning director Garner Stoll.

Mark Brockeveldt was working at the Lincoln, Neb., airport when he saw four immense lights approach. He said the lights were elongated and bathed in a white and gold light with reddish-gold tails like comets. As the objects crossed the airport, one dropped below the other three and its light went out, he said.

"I've worked out here for nine years and have never seen anything like it," said crew chief Mark Shoemaker at the Lincoln airport. "It was freaky."

The National UFO Reporting Center in Seattle got calls from "almost every state east of the Rocky Mountains" to Indiana and Mississippi, said spokesman Robert Gribble.

In October, a display of lights over the West was attributed to a Soviet rocket re-entering the atmosphere and pieces fell to earth in California.

Weld County, Colo., sheriff's dispatchers were deluged with calls by people who thought they had seen a plane going down in flames.

In Paducah, Burrage said a woman from Charleston, Mo., reported seeing objects that seemed to be 100 feet to 200 feet above her.

"She was in her car and just sat there dumbfounded," Burrage said. "She said the lights were unlike anything she'd seen before. She said it had an oval shape to it and there were lights beaming from it.

"She said she just sat there and froze."