

Canberra's UFO just space junk: Mt Stromlo

By MANDY LYNCH

About 2.25am yesterday a cigar-shaped object with a fiery orange tail sped across Canberra's sky. The object was visible for about 30 seconds, before breaking into about six pieces which moved in a line and disappeared over the horizon.

An astronomer at Mount Stromlo Observatory, Mr Shaun Hughes, was outside at the time and described the event as "spectacular". He said the object looked like a plane on fire with a red-orange stream behind it.

The bright lights, which were parallel to the horizon, moved from the hills north-west of the city. The path of the object was tracked as far as trees to the north-east by Mr Hughes and two other astronomers at the observatory, Professor Don Matheson and Mr Vince Ford.

The observatory had been "inundated" with telephone calls from people who reported sightings of the "unidentified flying object" they had

"unidentified flying object" they had seen, according to a spokeswoman. She said she was amazed by how many people were up at the time of the sighting.

The spokeswoman said the object was probably a large piece of space debris re-entering the atmosphere, rather than a meteorite.

"There are large numbers of satellite 'junk' going around the earth," she said. "It is estimated there are about 6000 pieces up there of football-size or bigger, and there are hundreds of thousands of smaller pieces."

It was not likely the remnants of the debris would be recovered as they probably hit the Pacific Ocean.

The spokeswoman said the object must have been travelling quite high as sightings were reported across northern and western NSW and southern Queensland. It was difficult to estimate its size, which could range from that of a football to an aeroplane, she said.

For those who missed out on the sighting, the latest in product advertising will light up Canberra skies tomorrow night with "stars" forming into words.

Brought to Canberra by the Aeroplane Jelly Company, the system called Nite-lites is an illuminated, computer-driven sign fixed underneath a small Cherokee 180 aeroplane.

Nite-Lites was developed by Mr Fred Hampton, of Perth.

