

Three fiery seconds: a meteoric fall



MICHAEL BACHELARD

FOR just three seconds on Saturday a meteor as bright as the sun streaked across the sky over Victoria and southern NSW, leaving a spectacular vapour trail.

Seismologist Gary Gibson said he was walking around his property at Newstead, in central Victoria, at 5.24pm, watching the vapour trails of passing jets, when he saw an intensely bright light plunging almost vertically earthward.

"When I first saw it it looked like another vapour trail," Mr Gibson said. "All of a sudden it started plummeting to the ground at a great rate. It burned up very, very brightly.

"Even though it was still daylight, it was like looking into a whole lot of welding equipment... It was as bright as the sun."

Mr Gibson noticed the vapour trail high in the sky at about 30 degrees above the horizon. At about 10 degrees it became intensely bright, snuffing out three seconds later as it reached the tree line.

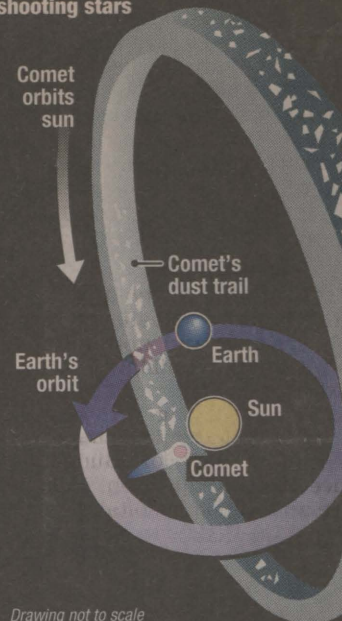
When he got home, the research manager at the Seismology Research Centre at Melbourne's La Trobe University, said he received a number of phone calls from people saying they had felt an earthquake in the area.

"The question is, did they feel the impact (as the meteor hit the earth) or hear the sonic boom?" he said.

A check of his seismic measuring equipment yesterday revealed "nothing came through the ground" on Saturday. "So it is almost certain what they heard was a sonic boom," he said.

According to Sky and Telescope magazine, meteors travel between 11km and 74km a second, up to 220 times the speed of sound. As they pass through earth's atmosphere they "vapourise by air friction in a white-hot streak". Most do not reach the ground.

Comets leave a trail of debris, comprising particles of dust, as they move around the solar system. Sometimes Earth ploughs into the debris and the dust particles enter Earth's atmosphere as meteors, or shooting stars



Celestial signature: The meteor's vapour trail seen from Albury airport soon after dusk

Picture: GLENN CAMPBELL