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NASA Leonid Balloon Snagged Some Far-Out Meteoroids

From: Stig Agermose <stig.agermose@get2net.dk>
Date: Tue, 13 Apr 1999 23:46:40 GMT
Fwd Date: Wed, 14 Apr 1999 08:20:10 -0400
Subject: NASA Leonid Balloon Snagged Some Far-Out Meteoroids

Source: Discovery (Channel) Online News,

<http://www.discovery.com/news/briefs/brief1.html?ct=3D3713ed11>

Go to the site for NASA's animated sequence showing "microscopic slices of an impact crater discovered on the xerogel capture device. The crater measures 20-30 microns in diameter. The animation shows the crater at various depths."

Stig

Tuesday, April 13, 1999

Leonid Meteor Results In

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For the first time ever, astronomers may have snagged meteoroids that originated outside the orbit of Uranus.

At the NASA/Ames Leonid Workshop Tuesday, astronomer David Noever and his colleagues from the Marshall Space Flight Center describe tiny particles captured in flight above Earth.

The study shows promise for an innovative method of meteoroid retrieval, and takes scientists closer to understanding the solar system at its adolescence.

Astronomers set the meteoroid trap by launching a weather balloon 12 miles into the atmosphere during the Leonid meteor shower last November. The event occurs once a year as Earth passes through the debris trail left by Comet Temple-Tuttle. Secured below the balloon were a digital video camera and a micrometeorite collector made of a gel-like material.

"Mainly, we were trying to answer whether this was a viable way of capturing meteoroids," says Noever.

When the team retrieved the balloon and examined the xerogel dust collector with an electron microscope, they discovered eight tiny impact craters. Several clues pointed to an extraterrestrial origin for the impactors.

The chemical signature was different from terrestrial dust but similar to cosmic dust found in ocean cores and in Antarctica. Also, the particles had a translucent rim surrounding an opaque core -- a characteristic of cosmic grains partially melted by friction in Earth's atmosphere.

"They fit the signature you would hope of extraterrestrial origin," says Noever.

But, says Noever, the particles need further analysis to confirm their origin. If they are from Comet-Temple Tuttle, they will provide an extraordinary clue to Earth's own beginnings.

"We believe that the material brought in to the inner solar system...more closely resembles the stuff of when the solar system was young," says astronomer John Horack of the Marshall Space Flight Center. "By getting these materials and putting them in your lab, you can understand what the solar system was like when it was young."

By Tracy Staedter, Discovery Online News

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Animation: Courtesy of Marshall Space Flight Center

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