

Mystery sighting a rare stargazer event

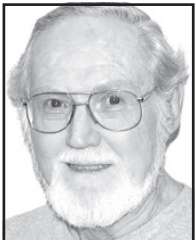
Recently, Sonya Moyer of Boyertown, Pa., emailed me asking about a mysterious night sky sight she couldn't identify.

She wrote: This morning around 5 a.m., I saw an amazing sight. I was sitting on my back porch facing southeast looking at the stars. A little above Orion a star just "swelled up" and seemed to burst! There were a few faint "sparks" that traveled up and to the right, then nothing – nothing where the star had been a moment before. I am sure of what I saw. Can you comment on this? Or you can just call me crazy, and I won't be offended. Sincerely, Sonya Moyer.

My response: No, I don't think you're crazy. I'm guessing you happened to see a meteor coming directly in your direction before it broke apart and burned up. Meteors "falling" and burning up in our atmosphere are a common occurrence, and meteors breaking up before burning up, although less common, aren't rare. But, given that I've heard of so few reports, I'd say your experience is rare. In fact, I'm aware of only one other person who has shared your experience – me – although I'm sure others must have as well.

I had the same experience once while stargazing alone at a state park in far west Texas, only mine didn't explode – it just increased in brightness rather dramatically, and then rather quickly faded away. I was baffled until a fellow stargazer later proffered an explanation, and I realized that must have been what I had seen. In both our cases, the meteor might have been "natural" – a piece of stony or metallic meteoroid material – or human-made – a piece of satellite or rocket debris reentering and burning up in Earth's atmosphere.

Given that one must be viewing in the right direction at the right moment from the right location on



Paul Derrick • Stargazer

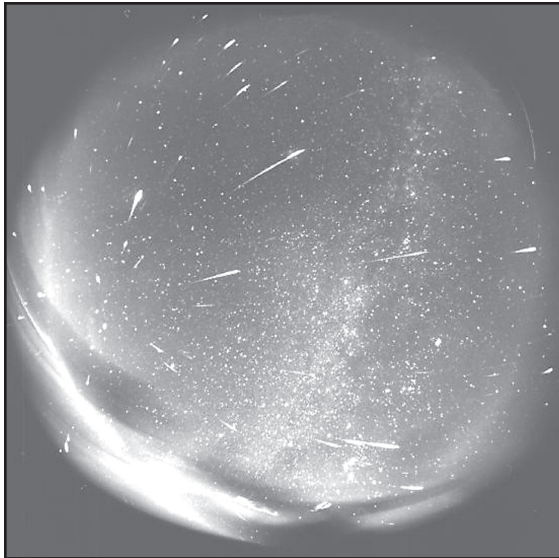
Earth to see what we saw, I'd say we were pretty lucky – and you were even luckier as your meteor broke up before disintegrating. Of course, we might be lucky in yet another way – had the meteor not completely burned up, and it was heading directly toward us.... Thanks for sharing your experience.

Most people have seen meteors, also called "shooting stars" and "falling stars," and stargazers who spend hours under the stars see countless meteors from the ordinary to those that make you gasp. And while seeing a meteor break up is far less common, it's not rare – I recall seeing three or four.

But seeing a meteor coming straight toward you – I would consider that pretty rare. And having a directly incoming meteor break up – extremely rare. I would like to hear from anyone who has seen either, or both simultaneously.

While meteors can usually be seen any clear night of the year and any time of night, seeing them still takes luck. One has to be looking in the right place at the right time, and they are usually so fleeting there's not time to point them out to a companion.

There are, however, ways of increasing the odds of seeing meteors. More will be seen under dark skies, away from urban light pollution, and when the Moon isn't up to wash out all but the brightest.



JURAJ TOTH/Modra Observatory in Slovakia posted on Wikimedia Commons

All-sky fish-eye four-hour exposure of the Leonid meteor shower Nov. 17, 1998. Most of the 156 meteors captured in this image seem to radiate from the constellation Leo the Lion, hence the name.

And comfort is important. You'll probably want to stretch out on a blanket or reclining lawn chair as standing or sitting in an ordinary lawn chair can be tiring and will quickly make your back and neck ache. When that happens, you'll not want to watch long, reducing your chances of seeing meteors.

When looking, slowly pan the skies in the direction with the least light pollution which is usually directly overhead. And while it's not convenient for

us night owls, more meteors are visible in the morning than evening with the best hours being from mid-night to dawn.

Finally, more meteors are apt to be seen during annual meteor showers, two of which occur this month. As Earth speeds around the sun at 67,000 mph, it regularly passes through the debris-strewn paths of several comets. When some of the debris enters Earth's atmosphere, friction causes it to burn and momentarily glow brilliantly as meteors in our night sky.

The following are the major annual meteor showers and when they usually peak. Dates are approximate since cometary debris drifts somewhat in space, making it difficult to predict the exact timing of Earth's passage through the maximum debris stream. Thus, it's best to be alert for increased meteor activity for several days around each stated date. Quadrantid – Jan. 4; Lyrids – April 22; Eta Aquarids – May 6; Delta Aquarids – July 30; Perseids – Aug. 13; Draconids – Oct. 8; Orionids – Oct. 21; Taurids – Nov. 12; Leonids – Nov. 17; Geminids – Dec. 14; Ursids – Dec. 14.

So in summary, one is more likely to see meteors away from urban lights under dark, moonless skies, after midnight, and during meteor showers. And who knows, like Sonya, you just might see one breaking up while coming directly toward you.

Paul Derrick is an amateur astronomer who lives in Waco, Texas. His website (www.stargazerpaul.com) contains an archive of past Stargazer columns and other basic stargazing information. Contact him at paulderrickwaco@aol.com or (254) 723-6346 or write 918 N. 30th St., Waco, Texas, 76707.

On the Beat

COLBY POLICE

Monday

12:40 a.m. – Caller requested welfare check. Not found.

1:27 a.m. – Welfare check on vehicle. Everything OK.

1:34 a.m. – Walk through at B-Hive.

6:09 a.m. – Caller reported barking dog. Everything OK.

9:22 a.m. – Caller reported dog at large. Not found.

10:30 p.m. – Locked building at Fike Park.

10:46 p.m. – Complaint of loud music at Colby House. Spoke with subjects, music turned down.

Tuesday

2:31 a.m. – Walk through at Wal-mart.

5:54 a.m. – Building check at Fike Park.

8:15 a.m. – Subject reported receiving harassing phone calls on his cell. Spoke to reporting party and other subject.

10:02 a.m. – Caller reported dog at large. Not found; owner was spoken to.

10:04 a.m. – Caller reported lost checkbook. Report filed.

1:23 a.m. – Caller reported bike stolen from Pioneer Memorial Library. Later recovered and returned to owner.

12:34 p.m. – Provided directions for motorist at the Law Enforcement Center.

2:47 p.m. – Suspicious vehicle: caller reported subject running from vehicle. Subject ran out of gas.

2:59 p.m. – Caller reported son's trike stolen from 1150 S. Franklin. Found, no report filed.

4 p.m. – Supplemental report for case in reference to Federal Bureau of Investigation.

5:17 p.m. – Report filed for theft of bicycle.

9 p.m. – Caller reported two dogs at large. Turned over to Colby Animal Clinic.

11:15 p.m. – Secured building at Fike Park.

THOMAS COUNTY SHERIFF

Monday

2:30 p.m. – Booked Lucas Merle English.

11:38 p.m. – Subject called 911 about semi on I-70 at eastbound mile 44. Performed traffic stop. Everything was OK.

Tuesday

12:47 a.m. – Provided directions to motorist on I-70 at eastbound mile 45 off ramp.

9:18 a.m. – Provided vehicle identification number inspections at Colby Dodge.

12:38 p.m. – Provided Vehicle Identification Number Inspection in the 500 block of County Rd. L.

2:40 p.m. – Booked Charles Dean Headley.

Sheep and goat conference offers variety

The Kansas State University Sheep and Goat Conference planned for Friday through Sunday, Nov. 4 to 6, in Manhattan will have information for veteran producers as well as those new to the industry.

"Our goal is to educate sheep and goat producers on current industry practices and trends," said Brian Faris, sheep and meat goat specialist with K-State Research and Extension. "and to provide an introduction for producers who are new to the respective industries."

The conference begins with registration from 9 a.m. to 12:30 p.m. on Friday and the formal program will start at 1 p.m. The conference ends at noon on Sunday.

Friday general sessions include Market Ani-

mal Evaluation and Breeding Animal Evaluation for both species, concluding with dinner and entertainment.

Saturday's presentations include: Commercial Cross-Breeding Programs; Multi-Species Grazing; Predator Management and Guardian Dogs; Common Diseases and Abortion Storm Prevention and Treatment; Managing Internal and External Parasites; Use of Distiller's Grains in Sheep and Goat Diets; Fencing and Facilities; Reproductive Management and New Technologies; Disbudding, Hoof Trimming and Tattooing; and More than Meat: Milk, Cheese, Dips and More.

The Sunday presentations include: Marketing Value-Added Lamb/Chevron Products and Carcass Evaluation.

Wheat certification underway

The Farm Service Agency office in Colby reminds farmers that 2012 wheat certification has started.

Due to budget constraints and an early reporting deadline, the agency will be providing producers with packets for wheat reporting. These packets will not be mailed; producers will need to pick them up and return them to the office as soon as possible but no later than Thursday, Dec. 1.

After the office receives the packets, acreage reports will be loaded and producers contacted to return to the office to sign before

Jan. 15. Other program information will be included in the packets as well.

When packets are picked up, there will be a list to sign for the 2012 Supplemental Revenue Assistance program. We will then run the workbook and contact you to come in and go over the information. No crop information is needed from the producer to begin the process.

Signup for 2012 DCP and ACRE program will begin Jan. 23. This is the final year of the current farm bill, and there will be no advance payments issued.

Women in Ag to meet

Women involved in agriculture are invited to the fall 2011 Women in Ag educational session on Thursday, Nov. 3, in Salina. Topic for the session will be Crops, Cows and Cash Flows – What Does It all Mean?

Kim Cerney, Farm Loan officer with the Farm Service Agency in Salina, and Joni James, K-State Research and Extension Agricultural Agent in Harvey County, will discuss farm record keeping, types of

records needed, why good records are important and various programs to make keeping those records easier.

The session will start at 7 p.m. at the Redeemer Lutheran Church at 743 E. Magnolia, Salina. Pre-registration is requested at the Extension office in Salina, (785) 309-5850, by Friday, Oct. 28.

For information, contact Mary Lou Odle, extension agent in Salina at (785) 309-5850.

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