

Meteor Lights Up Santa Cruz Sky

A blazing meteor which lit up the Santa Cruz landscape Sunday night with a bluish light and reportedly sent at least two pieces exploding into a coastal cliff near Davenport prompted a rash of calls to Santa Cruz police.

The "fireball" which soared over northern and central California at 6 p.m., was probably a meteor, according to the state Office of Emergency Services, and drew reports from Siskiyou County near the Oregon border to Morro Bay near San Luis Obispo.

Two families here reported seeing it.

A Santa Cruz family, driving from the UCSC campus after attending a production of "Romeo and Juliet," saw the display.

Dr. John Faulkner, professor of astronomy and astrophysics, said his 12-year-old son, Mike, a Mission Hill student, spotted it first.

"We looked out just as the roadway and landscape were lit up as though by a bluish arc light. "It kept coming down, not quite vertically, but at about 75 degrees.

11/30/81
"At first we saw an intense bluish, greenish, white light, half as bright as the moon. It was trailing gaseous smoke, dark gray in color," said Dr. Faulkner.

"Then it turned yellow, orange and finally a red and then it fizzled out. It was really quite slow — four or five seconds."

The Coast Guard called him and in their conversation a spokesman said the meteor had been spotted as far south as Morro Bay.

Faulkner said it was the first time he had seen a meteor light up the ground.

"It was probably a piece of interplanetary debris that had struck the earth's atmosphere. There are a couple of ways this could happen. When you have a meteoric shower, it tends to come from the broken head of an old comet. Every time the comet comes near the sun, the sun's radiation tends to break up the outer parts of the head. Those parts, bits of ice, rock and dust, spread out along the comet's path."

These will "shower" into the earth's atmosphere sometimes.

"Sunday's sighting, however, seemed to be a single event — simply a large chunk of interplanetary debris, maybe five billions years old, that finally entered the earth's atmosphere."

Vern Prather who lives on Vick Drive, off Empire Grade Road, said his daughter-in-law, Donna Prather, saw the display at 6:14 p.m. She said she saw a streak and then an explosion of color, similar to a Fourth of July rocket.

Prather also learned that some friends of his son were standing around a bonfire on the "beach below Davenport," when they heard a "mild sonic boom" behind them.

"Less than a half-minute later, they saw two fireballs explode against the face of the cliff above them.

"They thought it was dynamite," said Prather. "It made a big glow in each case and scared the heck out of them," he said.