

Flash in night sky a meteor in Bay Area

By San Jose Mercury News

It may not have been as spectacular as the space rock that streaked across the skies above Russia late Thursday, but the Bay Area's close encounter with a meteor Friday night was drawing its own attention on social networks.



Comments on Twitter indicated the object that flashed across the horizon about 7:45pm was blue in color and visible throughout the Bay Area and large areas of the West Coast, with at least one reported sighting in Washington state.

Amateur video footage broadcast on KTVU-2 showed a bright streak lasting approximately five seconds that appeared to head downward. Some viewers described it as a firework in the night sky.

One commenter on Twitter, who said they saw the meteor while driving in a car in Cupertino, said the object appeared to be headed west.

Scanner traffic at the Contra Costa County Sheriff's Office indicated that they were aware of the event, but a dispatcher said they had not received any emergency calls related to it.

Gerald McKeegan, an astronomer with the Chabot Space and Science Center in Oakland, was at the center Friday evening for its weekend stargazing sessions with free access to the center's large telescopes, but he said they did not spot the meteor there.

He said that the center received phone calls from people who reported seeing the meteor. Based on their reports, McKeegan said it may have been what astronomers call a “sporadic meteor,” an event that can happen several times a day but most of the time happens over the ocean, away from human eyes, and brings as much as 15,000 tons of space debris to Earth each year.

Meteors, hunks of rock and metal from space that fall to Earth, burn up as they go through the atmosphere, which is what apparently caused Friday night’s bright flash of light, McKeegan said.

It was likely smaller than another meteor that landed in the Bay Area in October, which caused a loud sonic boom as it fell, breaking apart and spreading rocks, called meteorites, in the North Bay, McKeegan said.

There were no reports of damage from Friday’s event, unlike the object that crashed down in the Ural Mountains of Russia less than 24 hours earlier shattering windows, scattering debris and injuring an estimated 1,100 people.

NASA scientists said that object, described as a “tiny asteroid,” measured about 45 feet across, weighed about 10,000 tons and was traveling about 40,000 mph before it exploded 15 miles above the Earth’s surface with a force equivalent to a small nuclear bomb.

Astronomers at the Chabot observatory said Friday night’s light show was not connected to the fly-by of a small asteroid earlier in the day. The asteroid, which NASA dubbed 2012 DA14, came within 17,200 miles of the Earth before continuing on its cosmic journey.