Star Guide: Meteorite exhibit is rock solid

Dan Ruby, Fleischmann Planetarium director, at the meteorite exhibit. Photo/Tony Berendsen

By Tony Berendsen

There are only eight states that are less populated than Nevada, and only one with more public land. That adds up to a lot of open country to go hunting for meteorites: rocks that have fallen from space.

Unfortunately, there are a lot of rocks in Nevada, so finding a space rock among the mix, even if you know what to look, can be very challenging. The good news is the Fleischmann Planetarium has a new exhibit strewn with meteorites you can

walk through. The staff can help you test to see if your rock came from space.

I've always been fascinated by meteorites because of their origin. During a visit to the planetarium this month I talked to Dan Ruby, Fleischmann Planetarium director, about his passion for them, and learned of his interest in showcasing their fabulous collection to the public.

Ruby said, "Each meteorite we have in our collection has a story to tell, a story about our solar system and beyond."

He noted that meteorites are specimens from space that didn't require a spaceship to collect.

Ruby said, "In recent years the planetarium has encouraged the public to bring in meteorite candidates for a meteorite-meteor wrong test.

He also offered some advice to predetermine if a rock may be a meteorite:

1. Is it dark in color?

2. Is it compact and smooth-rounded with no holes, sharp edges, or veins of different material?

3. If irregular in shape does it have thumbprint-like indentations, or was it found amongst a field of similar specimens?

4. Is it heavy for its size?

5. Does it have a flaky crust?

If the answer is "no" to 1 through 3 its' not a meteorite, and if you said "yes" to all, then maybe you should bring it to the planetarium for some testing at the planetarium's Science Station.

Ruby walked me through the collection of meteorites in the

exhibit hall, which are beautifully placed on pedestals capped with transparent cylinders allowing 360 viewing. Meteorites are arranged by type in a beautiful array around the massive 1-ton Quinn Canyon meteorite. You can even take one home, at least in a virtual way. Each meteorite in the collection is being 3D scanned.

The planetarium has an intern working on a project to scan all of the meteorites in the collection and to make the scans available so they can be 3D printed by the public. The scanning process has just begun, but Ruby did provide me with a scan which I printed.

Last but not least, during my visit to the planetarium I talked to student employees Apryl Witherspoon and Alexis Romero about Saturday and Sundays at the Science Station. They do free science demonstrations ranging from electrical conductivity to polymers. The Science Station is located on the main floor just outside of the Exhibit Hall and is also used to test rocks for meteorite.

The **Fleischmann Planetarium** is located on the UNR campus next to the Lawlor Events Center on Virginia Street. You don’t need to have a meteorite sample to stop by the planetarium. But, please do bring your fascination for science and astronomy. While you are there, why not take in a show or purchase a Christmas telescope for a loved one or maybe yourself.

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