

Tessmann Focal Points

Object Strikes Jupiter



Hubble photo of the July 19 impact

On July 19th, amateur astronomer Anthony Wesley of Australia, was observing Jupiter with his telescope and saw something that didn't belong: a large dark spot. Scientists at Pasadena's Jet Propulsion Laboratories used NASA's Infrared Telescope Facility in Mauna Kea, Hawaii, to follow up on Wesley's findings. The JPL group found evidence of a massive impact in the south pole region of Jupiter.

The Hubble Telescope was called into service and photographed the bruise on the face of the giant planet. Most likely, a comet or asteroid had made an unwitnessed strike on Jupiter. The impact zone looks remarkably similar to the impact

zones made by comet Shoemaker-Levy 9 on Jupiter in 1994 (see sidebar). Shuttle astronauts recently upgraded Hubble's old camera with a state-of-the-art model. The new camera took its first photos and performed flawlessly.

The team studying the photographic imagery of the impact claims the zone is about 6000 miles across, about twice the size of Europe. The actual impacting object was perhaps the size of two football fields.

Why did the event go unwitnessed? Astronomers say that events like this often go unobserved. Some of these objects are small or are very dark and difficult to spot. In the last quarter of the 20th century,

Flashback 1994:

Comet Shoemaker-Levy 9 Crashes into Jupiter

In March, 1993, Gene and Carolyn Shoemaker and David Levy discovered a comet that had broken apart into 23 separate pieces as it passed near Jupiter. But this wasn't to be its last encounter with Jupiter. In July 1994, all these fragments collided into the southern hemisphere of the king of the planets. The fragments traveled at a 133,000 miles per hour and the plume from the first impact was observed using the Hubble telescope on July 16. A total of 21 impacts were observed in all and the impact locations could be seen with even with the smallest backyard telescope. The event revealed Jupiter's role of being a giant "vacuum cleaner" in the inner solar system. Without the presence of Jupiter, the amount of impacts on other planets and the Earth might be much higher.

Flashback 1908: The Tunguska Event

On June 30, 1908, a powerful explosion rocked an area near the Tunguska river in Russia. Trees were knocked down and incinerated over a 20 mile area. It is believed that a large asteroid or comet disintegrated in the atmosphere. This event was the largest impact on Earth in modern times.

over 130 explosion of dark objects, most likely small asteroids or larger meteors, were detecting burning up in our atmosphere.