

The Great East Coast UFO of August 1986

An illuminating UFO case raises several interesting points.

James E. Oberg

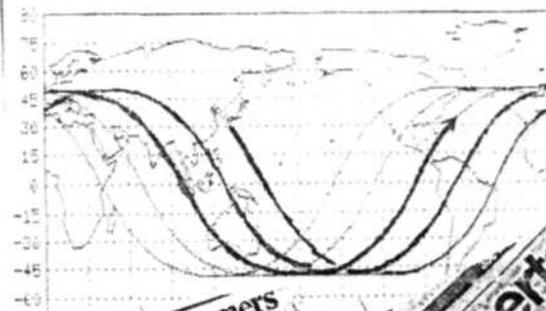
AT ABOUT 10 P.M., EST, on Tuesday, August 12, 1986 (0200 UT, August 13), nearly the entire eastern half of the United States was treated to a spectacular celestial apparition. Millions of people were outside looking for Perseid meteors, and many of them had their astronomical instruments and cameras at the ready. So when a bright cloudlike UFO (for it was a genuine unidentified flying object, at least for a day) appeared in the eastern sky, moving from right to left, it had probably the largest audience of any UFO ever witnessed in North America. Sightings occurred from Georgia (Florida was socked in with clouds) to Louisiana to Houston, Texas, to Tulsa and Oklahoma City, to Illinois, Kentucky, Michigan, Ontario and Quebec, and all points in between: South Carolina, Virginia, Massachusetts—the whole eastern seaboard.

Descriptions of the object and its motion varied, but a general picture soon emerged. It was called, in turn, a pinpoint, a moving spiral, a glowing cloud, and a big ball of fire. In Houston, Don Stockbauer described an orangish nebulosity surrounded by an irregularly shaped white cloud elongated vertically, with a dim starlike nucleus. Brenda Newton of Rochester, New York, recalled: "It started to get bigger and it had a tail. By the time we got out of the truck, it had begun to spiral. It lasted for a few minutes, then became like a dim star and floated toward the west." The vice president of the Syracusan Astronomical Society (New York) said it resembled a "reflection of the moon off a cloud, but it was very iridescent, very vivid." Wayne

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Japanese put satellites into orbit

TOKYO (UPI) — A new Japanese rocket carried two satellites into orbit today on its first flight, proving the capability of the country's space program.



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Jazzing light show puzzles astronomers
Special for USA TODAY

A spectacular light show that puzzled astronomers in Rochester, N.Y., was seen by many in eastern U.S. see mystery lights

Press & Sun-Bulletin
light in sky baffles experts

UFO perplexes officials

SYRACUSE, N.Y. (AP) — Residents of western New York

Madea, an amateur astronomer in northern Maine, saw a bright starlike object emit a luminous, rapidly expanding donut-shaped cloud; through a telescope Madea saw “a pinpoint of light, like a satellite, traveling with the cloud.”

As it turned out, amateur radio listeners—“hams”—were also receiving radio signals from space at that very moment. And that was the key that led many independent observers to solve the apparition quickly and accurately. Others did it the hard way, as I did, with the application of basic principles of spaceflight and orbital motion.

My involvement began at noon, August 13, when, at a “brown bag” luncheon meeting of astronomy enthusiasts, a report of a bright light in the eastern sky, seen from Houston, was discussed. Returning from lunch, I received a phone call from David L. Chandler, a writer for the *Boston Globe* with whom I had discussed other spaceflight stories months before. He filled me in on the sightings, and I suggested he check about space launchings, particularly the Japanese launch (which I had also learned of that morning). At first there was difficulty in ascertaining the exact launch time (International

Date Line, and confusion at the Japanese representative's office over EST vs. EDT), but an hour later, armed with a good liftoff time and with known orbital inclination and period, I was able to produce a hand-calculated map that showed the object heading up the East Coast at about 10 P.M. EST. Its altitude was about 1,500 km (almost a thousand miles), quite high enough for it still to have been sunlit even though the ground below had been dark for more than an hour.

Part of my advantage was a long familiarity with similar apparitions caused by space launches elsewhere in the world, most notably over South America (Soviet launchings from Plesetsk) and Australia (American launchings from Cape Canaveral). So my initial hypothesis about a propellant venting sprang quickly to mind. Such a phenomenon was unheard of over North America, but the new Japanese rocket test was also the first of its kind.

The names of the vehicles involved were a little confusing. The booster was called the "H-1," and it was the first launch. Its second stage was powered by the new "LE5" engine, using super-cold liquid hydrogen as fuel. Two payloads were deployed: an amateur radio satellite variously called JAS-1 (Japanese Amateur Satellite #1), JO-12 (Japan OSCAR 12), or "Fuji" (by the builders); the geodetic mirror satellite, EGP ("Experimental Geodetic Payload"), or "Ajisai" ("Hydrangea Flower"). The booster was launched from Tanegashima Island off Kyushu at 5:45 A.M., JST, August 13 (2045 UT, August 12), after a 14-minute hold. Precise tracking data from NORAD allowed a perfect match of sightings to space vehicle.

I then reported my results to the Smithsonian Scientific Event Network in Washington, D.C.; to NORAD Public Affairs in Colorado Springs; to the Committee for the Scientific Investigation of Claims of the Paranormal (which got me on a Buffalo, New York, radio show that had aired *live* accounts of the UFO on Tuesday evening); to NASA Public Information at the Kennedy Space Center in Florida; and to the MUFON research group in Texas. This in turn resulted in my receiving about 20 additional telephone calls from news media throughout the east.

Chandler's story appeared in the *Boston Globe* (p. 6) on Thursday, August 14. It moved over some national news wire, too, since it also appeared in the same day's *Houston Chronicle* and elsewhere. On Friday, I did an interview with an Associated Press reporter from Louisville, Kentucky, and that story moved nationally over the weekend.

Within a week, the "UFO" was stuffed, boxed, and buried. (It should also have been seen from Central America, the Caribbean, and the northern coast of South America—those reports may dribble in over the next few months.) But it was a marvelous experience for the witnesses and for the analysts, and several interesting points can be raised about "UFO reports" based on this fortuitous experiment.

Several interesting events involved coincidences. Caught up in the excitement, Tim Jones, an air traffic controller in Syracuse, reported three different-

colored lights randomly moving and hovering for 45 minutes (but it turned out he was watching B-52s land at nearby Rome AFB, several hours after the real UFO). His account was carried in the nationwide news media, but the solution rarely was. In Clark County, Kentucky, residents were panicked by an explosion while the light show was going on—but the sheriff later got an anonymous phone call confessing to setting off illegal fireworks. Recalled County Deputy Larry Lawson: “The people said their homes shook and windows vibrated as if there had been an explosion or earthquake. . . . They said the whole sky lit up. All these people weren’t imagining or seeing things. Some of them were very terrified over it right after it happened.” These illustrate the power of coincidence, in which two concurrent independent events can easily (and erroneously) be integrated into a single unsolvable mystery. Also, the emotions (such as fear) of witnesses are no measure of the authenticity of their original perception.

One other amusing aspect was the wide variety of half-baked explanations offered for the “UFO.” Some speculation associated it with the meteor shower, a barium cloud, or a satellite burnup, while other guesses associated it with an explosion of the Japanese satellite. Professor Richard Stoner of Bowling Green State University in Ohio was quoted as saying: “It is caused by little bits and pieces of dust from the comet. They’re very small, but if there were a larger piece, an icy piece of material, something about the size of a snowflake, it might well cause something like this. It would vaporize and leave a glowing cloud behind it.” Astronomy professor Martha Haynes of Cornell didn’t trust the observers: “When people who watch the stars once, maybe twice a year go out and look hard for a while, they’re bound to see things they think are strange. . . . When you’re in that mind-set anything like the light of a plane on the horizon looks strange.” John Bosworth of NASA’s Goddard Space Center scored a near-miss when he attributed the reports to glints off the EGP satellite’s mirrors, reflecting moonlight: “I suspect that’s what they saw,” he told a reporter. The National Weather Service and the Seattle-based National UFO Reporting Center agreed “it was some sort of natural phenomenon.”

A number of people, however, got it right, and right from the start. Tom Bolton of the David Dunlap Observatory north of Toronto told newsmen it was caused by release of something from a satellite: “The satellite was actually seen in the telescope here and we had a report from an amateur astronomer (who) saw it and saw the release of the material from it—but we’re not sure which satellite it was and we’re not sure what the material was that was released.” A number of amateur radio people also told their local papers exactly the true story: For example, Richard C. Eaton of Fayetteville, N.Y., a retired G.E. engineer, was quoted in the *Syracuse Herald Journal* as suspecting the cloud was part of the Japanese launch.

The spiral form also was intriguing. In Syracuse, amateur astronomer Denise Sabatini reported: “It started out as a pinpoint of light. It was as if it were releasing some type of reflective gas into the air, and as the gas was

released into air, it was as if it was spiraling around the pinpoint of light." The spiral was "like pouring milk into coffee." Astronomer Karl Kamper at the David Dunlap Observatory described the object as starlike surrounded by a small spiral cloud. (He told newsmen the spiral could have been fuel spilling from a damaged satellite and said it must have been extremely high in the sky.) Chuck Barnes, head naturalist at the Troy Farm and Nature Center near Detroit, had been giving an outdoor lecture on meteors when the UFO appeared: "It was glowing like a spiral pinwheel standing on end and moving on a line from southeast to northwest," he told newsmen (the motion was actually from southeast to *northeast*); "It appeared to be five or six times larger than a full moon." In Massachusetts, an amateur astronomer watched the plume from the rocket perform two full turns in four minutes, painting the spinning spiral as he watched.

The relevance of these perceptions to other UFO reports is connected with a series of night-time sky spirals seen over China in the late 1970s. While UFO enthusiasts have accepted them uncritically, experienced analysts have voiced the suspicion that they actually involved space launchings (much like the H-I over America on August 12). These intuitive suspicions were encouraged by a recent official Chinese disclosure of the cancellation of the "Windstorm" space booster, which through the 1970s was being developed in competition with the "Long March 3" booster; there were several flight tests, including one unsuccessful satellite launching, although precise dates were not provided. Further disclosures may allow a precise connection between "Windstorm" space shots and the "spiral UFOs" over China.

Another interesting phenomenon was the way in which UFO groups seemed to get a type of description different from those reported to the national news media. Robert Gribble of the National UFO Reporting Center in Seattle got more than a hundred telephone calls, consistently describing an object shooting straight up into the sky until it mushroomed at a certain altitude. ("It seemed to hold in a certain airspace," he recalled, adding "I got *no* reports of it moving across the sky.") Sherman Larson, with the Center for UFO Studies in Illinois, said his group received numerous calls: "In each case, witnesses said an object appeared to have exploded in the sky and then moved into a cloud." In these accounts, subconscious interpretations by the collectors had evidently colored the straightforward, pure perceptions, and without other accounts the stories collected by the UFO groups could well have coagulated into a "true UFO" if the solution had not been published so quickly. This is a long-recognized (but evidently still serious) problem with anecdotal data collection.

All in all, the great cloud UFO of August 12, 1986, was an exciting, illuminating experience, in more ways than one. ●