

Tunguska Fireball

During the first moments of dawn on June 30, 1908, a falling star flashed into sight over western China. It came to earth in a desolate region of peat bogs and pine forests near the Tunguska River in central Siberia, exploding above the ground with the force of 2,000 atomic bombs.

Shocked witnesses of what was later to be called the Tunguska Fireball reported a blinding light and deafening thunder that could be heard 500 miles away. In northern Siberia, that night became known as “White Night” because of all the glowing silver clouds that so many people reported. In fact, skies didn't return to normal until August. Even as far away as London, people were able to read without any trouble at midnight because the sky was so bright.

It was years before scientists heard news of the Siberian explosion because the region was so remote and there were no mass media. There are many explanations about what happened that June day in 1908. In the 1930s, one Russian engineer suggested that the explosion was actually the wreckage of an alien spaceship trying to land. Another explanation is that the Earth ran into a black hole. A black hole is an area of space with so much gravity that it acts like a giant vacuum cleaner, sucking in anything that gets too close.

Today, many scientists believe that a stony meteorite – a piece of comet that was 100 feet in diameter – exploded six miles above earth, leading to the devastation in Siberia. Astronomers believe that Tunguska-like collisions occur every 300 years or so. One thing is certain: If the next collision were to hit an urban area rather than a remote region, the loss of life would be much bigger than any other disaster in history.

