

Catch a Falling Star

by Jon Vara

High winds? Earthquake? Lightning? Those may be the first things that come to mind when you think of natural causes of structural damage, but don't forget meteorites. While a lot less common than the first three, they do happen. In fact, 2003 was an unusually productive year for meteorite strikes, with at least four houses punctured by falling space rocks in the United States alone.

Three of the strikes occurred early on the morning of March 27, when a minivan-sized meteor broke apart as it entered the atmosphere, spraying chunks of shattered rock over the south Chicago suburbs of Park Forest and Olympia Fields. In a fourth, separate incident on September 23, a basketball-sized stone blasted through a house on a quiet street in New Orleans.



JOSE FRANCISCO SALGADO, ADLER PLANETARIUM

The meteorite that struck this suburban Chicago home broke into several pieces after hitting a roof truss and punching through the ceiling drywall (left). After ripping through the venetian blind and crashing off the aluminum window sill, the largest fragment ricocheted off the floor and shattered a mirrored closet door (above). Fortunately, the homeowners' teenage son — asleep in bed a few feet away — was not injured.



CHRIS NOLAN

The 40-pound stone that punched through the roof of this New Orleans home passed through an upstairs bedroom, where it destroyed an antique desk and chair. It then tore through the newly remodeled downstairs powder room ("We didn't even have the toilet paper holder in place yet," the homeowner recalls) before breaking up against the crawlspace slab.



JOSE FRANCISCO SALGADO, ADLER PLANETARIUM



A second Chicago-area strike tore a ragged hole in the kitchen floor (above). The meteorite was recovered in a pile of clothes in the basement laundry room, with a scrap of vinyl flooring fused to its surface (left).