Meteor Tracking Using a Variety of Phenomenologies and Their Potential Application for Detecting Unidentified Anomalous Phenomena

Michael Lembeck[1] **and Rex D. Groves**[2]

[1]Chief Technical Officer, StarSense Innovations, LLC
[2]American Institute of Aeronautics and Astronautics

ABSTRACT

This paper reviews the phenomenology of detecting and tracking meteors through the passive observation of radio frequency (RF) reflections and its potential application for the detection of Unidentified Anomalous Phenomena (UAP). Signals from terrestrial and space-based transmitters can be exploited as RF illuminators to take advantage of the physical principles behind this technique. UAP generating plasmas entering or exiting the Earth's atmosphere, or as byproducts of their propulsion systems, may provide similar opportunities for detection. The paper considers the advantages, challenges, and inherent limitations of this approach in the context of UAP observations.

1 Introduction

The study of objects entering and interacting with Earth's atmosphere has traditionally relied on optical, radar, and seismic detection methods. Meteors, the luminous phenomena resulting from meteoroids ablating in the atmosphere, are routinely observed using such techniques, providing valuable insights into the composition of the solar system and the dynamics of the upper atmosphere. Passive radar, a technique that leverages existing radio transmissions for target detection without the need for a dedicated transmitter, has emerged as a cost-effective and regulation-friendly alternative for atmospheric sensing. This paper focuses on the principles of meteor detection using passive RF reflections and explores the conceptual extension of this methodology to the challenging task of detecting and tracking Unidentified Aerial Phenomena (UAP) in the near-Earth space environment. Given the increasing interest in UAP and the need for robust, multi-modal detection capabilities, understanding the potential contribution of passive RF reflection is a pertinent area of investigation.

2 Phenomenology of Meteor Tracking with Passive RF Reflections

The equipment setup includes commercially available Software Defined Radios (SDRs), which are cost-effective and versatile for RF signal processing. The system also employs high-gain antennas to enhance signal reception and minimize noise. Data acquisition and processing are managed by a central computer system utilizing advanced algorithms to filter out noise and identify potential UAP signals. This proposed methodology leverages existing meteor detection techniques, adapting them to the unique challenges of UAP detection, thereby providing a robust and scalable solution for continuous monitoring of the sky. By integrating these components, the system aims to provide a reliable and efficient means of detecting UAP, contributing valuable data to the ongoing study of anomalous phenomena. This approach not only enhances our understanding of UAP but also demonstrates the potential of RF technology in expanding the horizons of atmospheric and aerospace research.

2.1 The Principle of Detection

The fundamental principle behind detecting radio meteors passively involves utilizing the ionization trail created by a meteoroid as it traverses the Earth's atmosphere. As a meteoroid enters the atmosphere at supersonic speeds, it collides with atmospheric particles, transferring energy and causing ionization, where one or more electrons are stripped from the atoms or molecules, the mechanism which has been the subject of much study.[1] This process leaves behind a temporary trail of ionized plasma at altitudes around 90-110 km. When an electromagnetic wave from a distant transmitter (the illuminator) impinges upon this ionized trail, it can be reflected. A receiver, strategically located to intercept these reflected signals (meteor echoes), can then detect the presence of the meteor.

Unlike monostatic radar, where transmitter and receiver are co-located, bistatic systems separate these components by hundreds of kilometers.[2] This architecture leverages existing high-power transmitters, such as the French GRAVES radar (143.050 MHz), whose signals scatter off ionized meteor trails at altitudes of ~100 km.[2,3]

The transient nature of these trails—lasting milliseconds to seconds—creates detectable radio echoes characterized by sudden power spikes and Doppler shifts proportional to meteor velocity.[2,4]

When a meteoroid enters the atmosphere at velocities exceeding 11 km/s, aerodynamic heating vaporizes its surface, creating a cylindrical plasma trail through collisional ionization. The electron density within this trail follows the relation:

$$n_e(t) = n_0 e^{-\alpha t} \cos^2\left(\frac{\pi t}{2\tau}\right) \tag{1}$$

where n_0 is the peak electron density, α is the attachment coefficient, and τ is the trail persistence time.[2] This ionization profile determines the radar cross-section and echo duration, with larger meteors producing longer-lasting trails detectable as extended signals.[2]

Velocity and Trajectory Determination

The Doppler shift (Δf) in received signals provides direct velocity measurements through:

$$v = \frac{c\Delta f}{2 f_0 \cos\theta} \tag{2}$$

where c is the speed of light, f_0 is the transmitter frequency, and θ is the angle between the meteor trajectory and the transmitter-receiver baseline.[2,5] Multi-station networks can triangulate trajectories by comparing arrival times and Doppler profiles across spatially separated receivers.

Mass and Composition Estimation

Echo duration (t_{dur}) correlates with meteoroid mass (m) via:

$$m \propto \left(\frac{t_{\text{dur}}}{\rho}\right)^{3/2} \tag{3}$$

where ρ is the bulk density inferred from ablation characteristics.[5] Spectral analysis of Doppler broadening further distinguishes stony (chondritic) from metallic (iron-nickel) compositions based on differential ionization efficiencies.[2]

2.2 Types of Meteor Echoes

Meteor echoes are broadly classified into two main types based on their distinct characteristics. Type 1 echoes are typically short-lasting, often around one second in duration. They originate from high-speed meteors that intercept high-frequency radio waves at night, with these waves successfully escaping the ionosphere. The velocity of the meteor causes a significant frequency shift due to the Doppler effect. In contrast, Type 2 echoes are longer-lasting and result from radio waves reflecting off ionized clouds. These clouds are generated by slower meteors during the daytime and subsequently drift with atmospheric winds until they dissipate. A popular piece of online shareware called Echoes, a RTL-SDR stick, a Raspberry Pi, and a Yagi antenna are all that is needed to explore this phenomena (Figure 1).

2.3 Sources of RF Illumination

Passive radar systems can leverage a variety of existing RF transmitters to illuminate targets. Terrestrial Broadcast Transmitters, including TV, FM, and AM stations, are widely available and have a history of use in forward scatter meteor detection. Cell phone towers also serve as a potential illumination source, as cellular networks emit across a broad range of frequencies. Additionally, satellites, specifically communications and navigation satellites, transmit RF signals that can be exploited for meteor detection. Military radars represent another category of powerful illuminators, though detailed information regarding their characteristics may not be publicly accessible. The broad frequency spectrum provided by these diverse sources facilitates the detection of different meteor types, owing to variations in frequency-dependent scattering.

2.4 Multi-Static Nature of Passive Radar

Passive radar is inherently multi-static, allowing a single receiver to detect reflections from numerous geographically separated transmitters. This multi-static nature offers two key advantages: 3D trajectory estimation and enhanced detection probability. By analyzing echoes from multiple sources, it becomes possible to triangulate meteor paths resulting in an estimate of their trajectories. The availability of different illumination angles significantly increases the likelihood of capturing specular meteor reflections, thus enhancing the overall detection probability.

Figure 1. Echoes is experimental spectral analysis software, supported by am RTL-SDR and Yagi antenna, for the detection, counting and analysis of radio echoes produced by meteors entering the atmosphere. (https://www.gabb.it/echoes/)

2.5 Information Extraction from Meteor Echoes

Passive radar echoes provide a wealth of scientific data enabling various studies. They enable the estimation of meteoroid flux and orbits by analyzing echo counts and durations. The data also supports meteor radiant surveys, allowing for the identification of the apparent origins of meteors in the sky, which in turn aids in the discovery of new meteor showers. Atmospheric winds can be studied by examining the Doppler shifts in echoes, revealing wind speeds at altitudes between 90 and 110 km. These observations also contribute to ionospheric studies by providing insights into ionospheric irregularities and their relationship with solar wind–magnetosphere interactions.

2.6 Direct RF Emissions

Beyond simply reflecting RF signals, meteors may also emit their own RF signals, which have been detected in the 3–300 MHz range. These direct emissions are believed to originate from several mechanisms. Electrostatic instabilities can cause Langmuir waves to convert into RF radiation due to streaming plasma instabilities. Bremsstrahlung radiation is produced through collisions between trail electrons and neutral atoms, resulting in broadband RF emissions. And, in magnetized plasma, emissions can occur near the cyclotron resonance, specifically at the electron cyclotron frequency:

$$f_{ce} \approx 2.8 \times 10^6 B, \tag{4}$$

where B is the magnetic field strength.[5,6]

2.7 Other Detection Modalities

Impact-Generated Plasma Signatures

Hypervelocity collisions (exceeding 3 km/s) between micrometeoroids and spacecraft surfaces generate dense, micron-scale plasmas with temperatures potentially surpassing 10^6 K. These transient plasmas emit radiation through multiple mechanisms, particularly in the radio and X-ray regimes.

1. **Plasma Oscillations:** Rapid ionization creates steep electron density gradients, which excite collective oscillations in the plasma.[7] These oscillations produce narrowband, coherent electromagnetic radiation at the plasma frequency:

$$f_{pe} = \frac{1}{2\pi}\sqrt{\frac{n_e e^2}{\varepsilon_0 m_e}} \tag{5}$$

where n_e is the electron density, e is the elementary charge, ε_0 is the vacuum permittivity, and m_e is the electron mass. The plasma frequency sets a natural cutoff below which electromagnetic waves cannot propagate through the plasma.

Passive RF systems employing software-defined radios (SDRs) and high-gain antennas, as described in the associated meteor detection study, are capable of receiving emissions near this plasma frequency, particularly within the VHF and low UHF bands (e.g., 30–300 MHz). Plasma oscillations with electron densities in the range 10^9–10^{11} cm^{-3} fall well within the detection band of these systems. However, frequencies below $\sim$10 MHz may be difficult to detect from the ground due to ionospheric absorption and anthropogenic noise, unless monitored from a space-based platform.

2. **Bremsstrahlung Radiation:** As thermal electrons scatter off ions within the impact-generated plasma, they decelerate and emit broadband radiation through the bremsstrahlung mechanism. The resulting spectrum is continuous, extending from radio frequencies into the X-ray regime, with spectral power approximately governed (in the thermal case) by:[8]

$$\varepsilon_\nu \propto \frac{n_e n_i}{\sqrt{T_e}} e^{-h\nu/k_B T_e} \tag{6}$$

where T_e is the electron temperature, n_i is the ion density, h is Planck's constant, k_B is Boltzmann's constant, and ν is the frequency. This emission is strongest at frequencies $\nu \sim k_B T_e/h$, typically in the ultraviolet to soft X-ray range for impact plasmas.

While bremsstrahlung includes low-frequency components, its emission strength in the VHF band is generally weak and difficult to distinguish from background noise. The RF detection hardware described in the meteor tracking system lacks sensitivity in the optical, ultraviolet, and X-ray bands where bremsstrahlung peaks. Therefore, direct detection of bremsstrahlung radiation using the existing RF-centric setup is unlikely. Detection of such emissions would require the addition of dedicated UV/X-ray sensors or broadband optical instrumentation capable of resolving high-temperature plasma signatures.

Optical Detection Modalities

Impact flashes also provide a complementary detection method. The optical irradiance I from such events is approximately proportional to the kinetic energy of the impacting particle:[9]

$$I \propto \frac{1}{2} m v^2 \eta \tag{7}$$

where m and v are the mass and velocity of the particle, and η is the luminous efficiency (typically $\eta \sim 10^{-3}$ for aluminum impacts). Multi-spectral imaging in the 300–900 nm range improves detection sensitivity, particularly for sub-centimeter debris. Integration of such imaging systems alongside RF receivers may expand detection capability beyond ionization-based phenomena.

3 Applying Passive RF Reflection to UAP Detection

Extending the principles of passive meteor radar to the detection of UAP (Unidentified Anomalous Phenomena) entering or exiting the atmosphere presents both intriguing possibilities and significant challenges.

3.1 Similarities and Potential RF Signatures of UAP

Similar to meteoroids, UAP entering the atmosphere would interact with air molecules, potentially leading to ionization or other forms of energy release that could, in theory, reflect or scatter RF signals. If UAP possess onboard radio communication or propulsion systems that emit RF energy, these emissions could also be detected by passive radar receivers. In some reported cases, military aircraft systems have processed radio frequency (RF) energy associated with UAP sightings.

3.2 Challenges in UAP Detection Compared to Meteors

Despite theoretical similarities between UAP and meteors in their interaction with the atmosphere, detecting UAP using passive RF reflection is considerably more complex due to several factors. A primary challenge lies in the unknown RF characteristics of UAP. Unlike meteors, UAP may not consistently produce ionization trails, or they might emit RF signals sporadically, directionally, or in uncommon frequency bands. Some reports even suggest UAP could exhibit active signature management.

Another significant hurdle is being able to keep up with their maneuverability and trajectory. While meteors follow predictable ballistic paths, UAP have been reported to display erratic movements, such as hovering, reversing, rapid acceleration, and moving without visible propulsion. Such unpredictable behavior greatly complicates passive tracking.

Stealth capabilities are a potential concern, as hypothetical stealth technology could minimize UAP radar cross-sections. There is an account of a stealth aircraft appearing as a "hole" in meteor backscatter, which suggests the possibility of RF absorption or redirection by UAP.

Signal discrimination also presents a major difficulty. Passive radar systems typically receive a mixture of direct transmissions and reflections from various common objects like aircraft, birds, weather phenomena, and ground clutter. Distinguishing a weak, unusual UAP echo from this background noise would necessitate sophisticated signal processing and a prior understanding of UAP RF signatures, which is currently unavailable.

Finally, atmospheric effects can significantly impact detection. Variations in ionospheric and tropospheric conditions can distort or attenuate weak RF signals from UAP, further complicating their detection.

3.3 Utilizing Existing Radar Signals Passively

An alternative method for detecting UAP is passive listening for echoes from existing primary surveillance radars (PSRs). Bistatic or multistatic radar configurations use these powerful transmissions, but require receiving systems capable of operating at relevant frequencies (e.g., 2.7–2.9 GHz for some PSRs). The Manastash Ridge Radar serves as an example of a forward-scatter (bistatic) radar system adapted to such detection tasks under specific geographic and operational conditions.[10] For either reflected or emitted RF signals, a typical ground station configuration includes:

- **Antenna:** A three-element Yagi-Uda antenna optimized for 143–145 MHz.
- **Low-Noise Amplifier (LNA):** Provides 20 dB gain with a 0.75 dB noise figure, overcoming free-space path loss over distances up to 450 km.[2]
- **Bandpass Filter:** Centered at 145 MHz with a 10 MHz bandwidth to reject out-of-band interference.[2]
- **Detection Software:** Automated tools such as `echoes` analyze power thresholds and Doppler profiles for real-time meteor detection and classification.[2]

4 Advantages and Limitations for UAP Detection

Applying passive RF reflection for UAP detection offers several possible advantages. First, it allows for covert operations. Because passive radar systems do not transmit their own signals, they are inherently covert and cannot be detected by a potential adversary or the UAP itself. Second, it ensures regulatory compliance. Operating a passive radar system does not necessitate frequency allocation or licensing from regulatory bodies such as the FCC, given that it does not involve signal transmission. This enables the use of illuminators with kilowatt or even megawatt class effective radiated power without violating legal regulations. Third, there is wide-area surveillance potential. By utilizing powerful and extensively distributed transmitters, a network of passive receivers could potentially monitor vast volumes of airspace for anomalous reflections. Finally, passive radar offers cost-effective monitoring. Once the necessary receiving infrastructure is in place, the operational costs are generally lower compared to active radar systems, as there are no expenses associated with transmitter maintenance or power consumption.

4.1 Limitations

Despite its advantages, passive RF reflection for UAP detection also faces significant limitations. A key constraint is its dependence on illuminators of opportunity. The effectiveness of a passive radar system hinges entirely on the availability and characteristics of suitable RF transmitters near the potential UAP trajectory. If strong illuminators are absent in the relevant airspace, the probability of detection will be low. Another major obstacle is the unknown UAP RF signature. The current lack of knowledge regarding UAP RF emissions or reflection properties presents a considerable challenge. Systems optimized for detecting meteor ionization may not possess the necessary sensitivity to identify the specific signatures, if any, produced by UAP.

Signal processing complexity is also a significant concern. Extracting valuable information from passive radar data, particularly from potentially weak and anomalous UAP echoes, requires sophisticated signal processing algorithms. Differentiating these echoes from background noise and other interference sources is a substantial challenge. Algorithms are required to process recorded files and concentrate on signals of interest to reduce computational intensity. Achieving real-time computation and display of passive radar data for UAP detection would benefit from high-end computational resources and advanced algorithms that might not yet be available.

Geometric constraints also play a crucial role. The strength of the reflected signal is highly dependent on the geometric configuration between the transmitter, the UAP, and the receiver. Detection is most probable when the UAP is positioned at a point that provides a favorable scattering angle towards the receiver.

Atmospheric distortion can also severely impact RF signal propagation. The Earth's atmosphere can distort or attenuate UAP echoes, particularly at higher frequencies. It's worth noting that ground-based RF detection below 10 MHz is further hindered by ionospheric absorption and anthropogenic noise. To overcome these limitations, satellite-based receivers, such as those on the International Space Station, can monitor the 1–40 MHz band for short-duration (< 1 second) emissions correlated with optical events.

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Determining a UAP from a meteor involves analyzing distinct characteristics of the reflected radio frequency (RF) signals and their associated patterns. The methodology includes:

1. *Signal Duration* - Meteor: Produces short-lived, transient reflections due to the rapid dissipation of the ionized trail. These signals typically last a few milliseconds to a few seconds. - UAP: Expected to produce sustained reflections due to their prolonged presence and maneuverability. The signal may last significantly longer and exhibit variable patterns over time.

2. *Signal Intensity and Decay* - Meteor: Reflection intensity is typically sharp and decays rapidly as the plasma trail disperses. - UAP: Reflections may show less abrupt changes in intensity, potentially fluctuating due to movement, orientation, or interaction with the atmosphere.

3. *Doppler Shift Analysis* - Meteor: Exhibits a predictable Doppler shift based on its consistent high-speed entry into the atmosphere, often with a linear trajectory. - UAP: Doppler shifts are expected to be more complex and variable, reflecting non-linear motion, abrupt velocity changes, or hovering behavior.

4. *Signal Modulation* - Meteor: Reflected signals are generally smooth and lack complex modulation, as they are a result of passive reflection. - UAP: May exhibit unique frequency modulations or intermittent patterns caused by rapid maneuvering or potential active emissions.

5. *Spatial and Temporal Patterns* - Meteor: Typically appears in predictable locations (e.g., meteor showers) and at specific times associated with Earth's orbit through cometary debris. - UAP: Detected in irregular locations and times, showing no correlation with known meteor events, and may remain stationary or move against expected atmospheric currents.

6. *Correlation Across Sensors* - Using a network of RF receivers, signals can be triangulated to determine the object's trajectory. A meteor will have a predictable path aligned with Earth's gravitational influence, while a UAP might display erratic, unconventional movement patterns.

7. *Plasma Characteristics* - Meteor: Plasma generated by meteors follows a consistent decay process tied to their kinetic energy and ionization rate. - UAP: If plasma is present, its behavior may differ, showing unusual emission frequencies or longer-lasting ionized trails due to atypical energy sources or interactions.

8. *Frequency Band Behavior* - Meteor: Plasma reflections often shift from high to low frequencies as the trail dissipates. - UAP: Reflections may remain stable within specific bands or exhibit anomalous shifts not typical of plasma decay.

By combining these criteria and leveraging advanced signal-processing algorithms, it is possible to distinguish UAPs from meteors with high confidence. This differentiation requires continuous monitoring, pattern recognition, and comparison with known meteorological and astronomical data.

5 Discussion and Comparison with Active Radar

While active radar systems are the primary tool for detecting and tracking aerial objects—including some reported UAP observations—passive RF reflection offers a complementary approach with unique advantages and limitations.

Active radar systems transmit RF pulses and analyze the backscattered echoes to determine range, velocity, and bearing. This technique allows full control over the illumination waveform, pulse timing, and receiver sensitivity. However, these systems are susceptible to jamming and can be readily detected by adversaries or even the targets themselves.

Passive radar, by contrast, offers several benefits including stealth and regulatory flexibility. Since passive systems do not emit their own signals, they are inherently difficult to detect or jam. Passive systems require no spectrum allocation or licensing, enabling legal operation even with high-power illumination sources. The primary limitations of passive radar include its lack of control over signal characteristics and its dependence on target reflectivity under ambient RF fields.

The feasibility of detecting UAP using passive radar depends heavily on whether such phenomena reflect existing RF signals or emit their own RF emissions. Several military reports describe UAP interactions with conventional radar systems, suggesting that under favorable conditions, passive radar systems may also register UAP-related anomalies.

6 Conclusion and Future Directions

Passive RF reflection provides a valuable and cost-effective method for studying meteors and the dynamics of the upper atmosphere. Its inherent multi-static nature and reliance on widely available transmitters offer unique advantages for continuous and potentially wide-area monitoring.

While applying this technique to the detection of UAP entering or exiting the atmosphere presents considerable challenges—primarily due to the unknown RF characteristics and potentially advanced or non-conventional behavior of such objects—it remains a viable complementary detection modality worth exploring.

6.1 Recommendations for Future Work

For future work concerning UAP detection using passive RF reflection, several recommendations are put forth. One critical area is the development of advanced signal processing algorithms specifically designed to detect weak, non-standard, or anomalous RF echoes potentially associated with UAP. Another recommendation is to explore illuminator diversity and receiver configuration, which involves experimenting with a broader range of RF sources and receiver geometries to maximize detection coverage and frequency sensitivity.

Modeling hypothetical RF interactions is also important. This entails exploring possible scattering, emission, or absorption signatures from UAP based on known physical principles and observational reports. Similarly, sensor fusion is recommended, as the integration of passive RF systems with optical, infrared, and active radar platforms fits well in the construct of a robust, multi-modal detection framework for thoroughly characterizing unidentified aerial phenomena.

While passive RF reflection alone may not yield definitive identifications of UAP, its stealth, scalability, and cost advantages make it an essential component of any layered sensing strategy aimed at understanding these elusive phenomena.

Summary

UAP detection can adapt methods from meteor detection by using RF receivers tuned to FM radio stations. When a UAP reflects FM signals, receivers capture these reflections, which exhibit unique characteristics like altered amplitude, Doppler shifts, and variable decay rates. Unlike meteors, which produce brief and transient signals, UAP reflections may persist longer due to their maneuverability and sustained presence. Using an array of strategically positioned receivers, these signals can be triangulated to estimate the UAP's velocity and trajectory. This cost-effective approach leverages existing FM infrastructure and advanced algorithms to filter noise and identify UAP-specific patterns, providing a scalable solution for atmospheric monitoring.

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