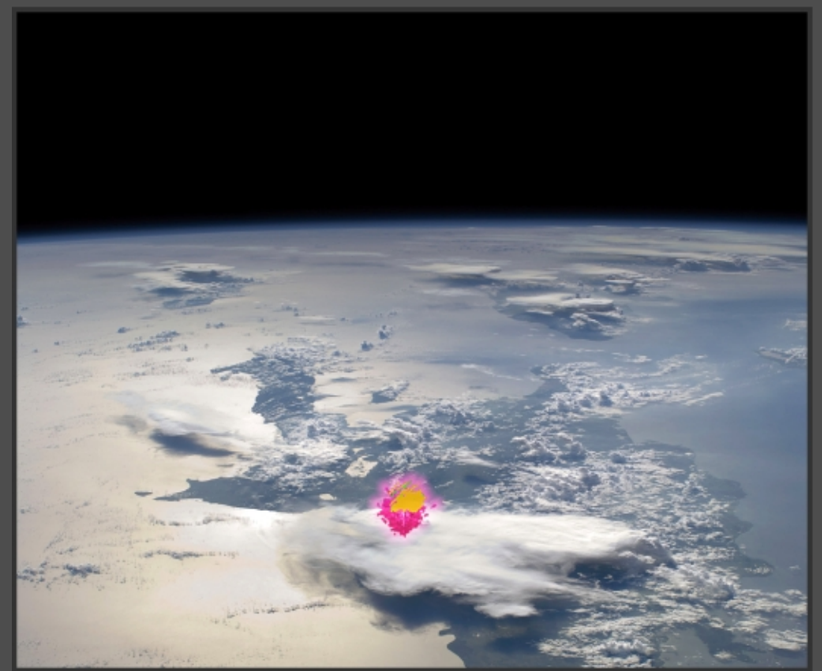
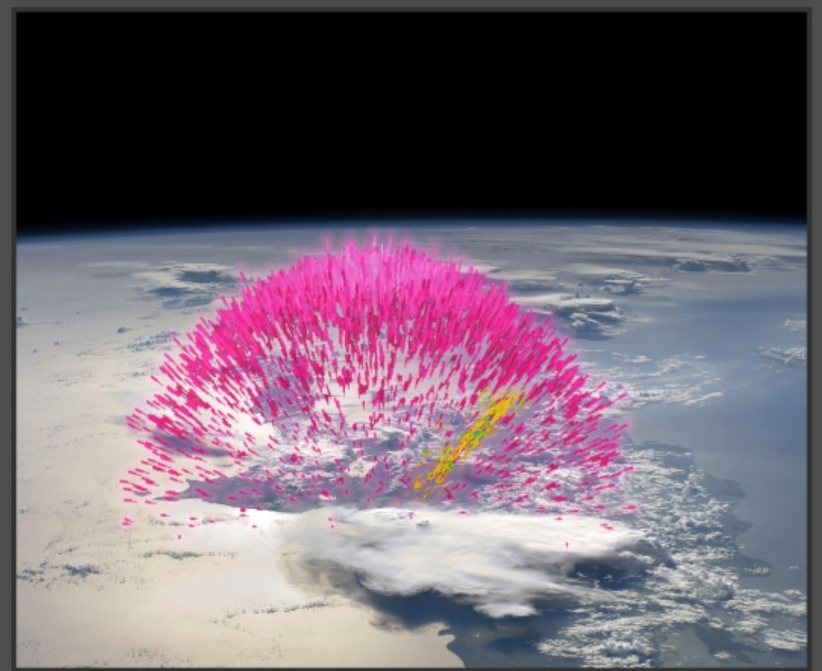
How thunderstorms launch particle beams into space



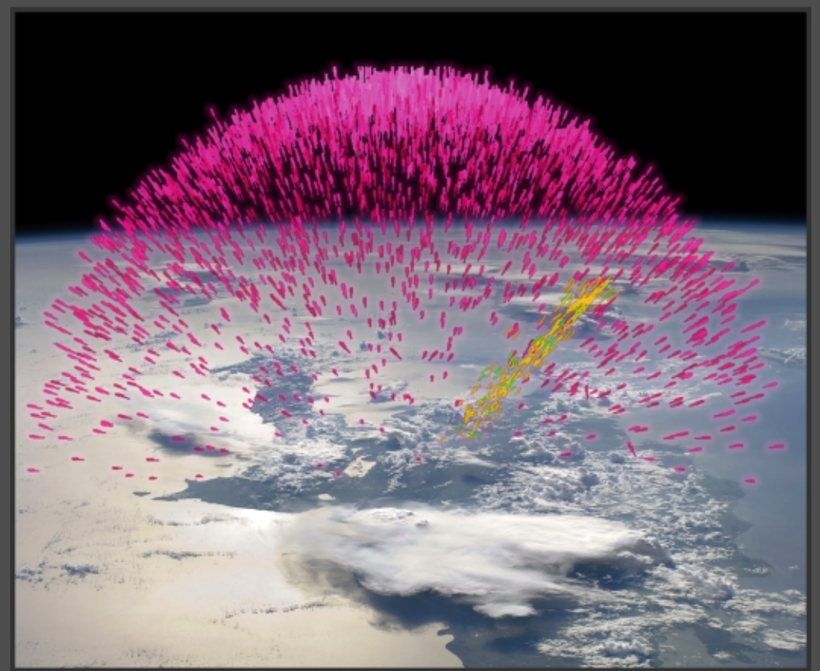
1. Electric fields near the top of the storm create an upward-moving avalanche of electrons. When their paths are deflected by molecules in the air, these electrons emit gamma rays, the highest-energy form of light.

These images are based on a TGF simulation by Joseph Dwyer at the Florida Institute of Technology. This frame tracks the gamma rays and particles from a 0.2-millisecond-old TGF that began at an altitude of 9.3 miles (15 km).



2. When gamma-ray energy collides with electrons, they accelerate to near the speed of light. Some gamma rays pass near the nuclei of atoms. When this happens, the gamma ray transforms into an electron and its antiparticle, a positron.

These high-energy electrons and positrons escape into space by spiraling along Earth's magnetic field. In this frame, the TGF is 1.4 milliseconds old.



3. Here the TGF is 1.98 milliseconds old, and its electron/positron beam is reaching altitudes where it may intercept spacecraft, such as NASA's Fermi Gamma-ray Space Telescope.

Fermi's Gamma-ray Burst Monitor detected a signal charateristic of positron annihilation. When a positron collided with an electron on the spacecraft, the two particles transformed into gamma rays.

Credit: NASA/Goddard Space Flight Center/J. Dwyer, Florida Inst. of Technology