

# Microburst Scale Size Derived from a Bouncing Packet Microburst Simultaneously Observed with the FIREBIRD-II CubeSats

Mykhaylo Shumko<sup>1</sup>, John Sample<sup>1</sup>, Arlo Johnson<sup>1</sup>, Bern Blake<sup>2</sup>, Alex Crew<sup>3</sup>, Harlan  
Spence<sup>4</sup>, David Klumpar<sup>1</sup>, Oleksiy Agapitov<sup>5</sup>, Matthew Handley<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Department of Physics, Montana State University, Bozeman, MT

<sup>2</sup>Space Science Applications Laboratory, The Aerospace Corporation, Los Angeles, California

<sup>3</sup>The Johns Hopkins University Applied Physics Laboratory LLC, Laurel, Maryland

<sup>4</sup>Institute for the Study of Earth, Oceans, and Space, University of New Hampshire, Durham, NH

<sup>5</sup>Space Sciences Laboratory, UC Berkeley, Berkeley, CA

## Key Points:

- A bouncing packet microburst was simultaneously observed by the two FIREBIRD-II CubeSats on February 2nd, 2015.
- The microburst's latitudinal and longitudinal scale sizes at LEO was  $> 28.8 \pm 0.8$  km and  $> 38.5 \pm 8.8$  km, respectively.
- The microburst LEO scale sizes mapped to the magnetic equator are  $> 504 \pm 14$  km radially, and  $> 451 \pm 103$  km azimuthally.

## Abstract

The FIREBIRD-II CubeSats simultaneously observed a bouncing packet microburst on February 2nd, 2015 during a small storm. Its latitudinal scale size  $> 28.8 \pm 0.8$  km and the longitudinal scale size  $> 38.5 \pm 8.8$  km is calculated in low earth orbit. Using the Tsyganenko 1989 magnetic field model, these scale sizes were mapped to the magnetic equator to get the radial and azimuthal scale sizes of  $> 504 \pm 14$  km and  $> 451 \pm 103$  km, respectively. These scale sizes will help to answer the problem of the relative importance of microbursts in radiation belt electron losses. Lastly, the electron bounce period of the subsequent bounces was calculated and compared to analytical and numerical bounce times to validate numerous magnetic field models.

## 1 Introduction

The dynamics of radiation belt electrons are complex, and are driven by competition between source and loss mechanisms. A few loss mechanisms include radial diffusion [Shprits and Thorne, 2004], magnetopause shadowing [Ukhorskiy et al., 2006], and pitch angle diffusion [Selesnick et al., 2003; Abel and Thorne, 1998] due to plasma wave and Coulomb scattering. As described in [Millan and Thorne, 2007; Thorne, 2010] and references contained within, there are a variety of waves that cause pitch angle scattering, including EMIC waves, Plasmaspheric hiss, ULF waves, and whistler-mode chorus. Whistler-mode chorus predominantly occurs in the dawn sector [Li et al., 2009] and it accelerates (scatters) electrons with large (small) equatorial pitch angles [Horne and Thorne, 2003]. It is currently believed that chorus waves are responsible for intense increases in electron precipitation flux termed microbursts.

Microbursts are observed in Low Earth Orbit (LEO) with, e.g. SAMPEX [Nakamura et al., 1995, 2000; Blake et al., 1996; Lorentzen et al., 2001a,b; O'Brien et al., 2003, 2004; Blum et al., 2015] and FIREBIRD [Crew et al., 2016]. High altitude balloons also observe microbursts in the form of Bremsstrahlung X-rays [Parks, 1967; Woodger et al., 2015; Anderson et al., 2017]. Similar to chorus waves, microbursts predominantly occur in the dawn sector [Lorentzen et al., 2001b]. Understanding microburst precipitation is important to radiation belt dynamics since they have been modeled and empirically estimated to deplete the relativistic electron population of the outer radiation belt on time scales of hours to a few days [O'Brien et al., 2004; Thorne et al., 2005; Shprits et al., 2007].

An important parameter in the estimation of radiation belt electron losses due to microbursts is their scale size. Parks [1967] used X-ray imagers on high altitude balloons to estimate the microburst scale size from Bremsstrahlung X-rays to be  $40 \pm 14$  km. In Blake et al. [1996], a bouncing packet microburst, observed with SAMPEX, was estimated to have a latitudinal scale size of "at least a few tens of kilometers", while Blake et al. [1996] concluded that typically, they are less than a few tens of electron gyroradii in size. Dietrich et al. [2010] used SAMPEX with ground-based ULF stations and concluded that microbursts have scale sizes  $< 4$  km.

Since February 1st, 2015, microbursts have been observed by the FIREBIRD-II pair of CubeSats (FU3 and FU4) in LEO. On February 2nd, 2015, Crew et al. [2016] reported a microburst with a scale size of 11 km. On the same day, a bouncing packet microburst was simultaneously observed on both spacecraft. The microburst decay was observed over the period of a few seconds, while the spacecraft were traversing in L. This analysis uses FU3 and FU4 to resolve the space-time ambiguity of the microburst. The rest of this paper is organized as follows: in section 2, the spacecraft and the microburst observation will be introduced. In section 3, the methodology of the spacecraft time and position correction, the microburst latitudinal and longitudinal scale sizes in LEO and the magnetic equator, and electron bounce period will be explained. Lastly, in section 4, these results will be tied to the current empirical and theoretical understanding of microbursts and their connection to whistler-mode chorus scales.

## 2 Spacecraft and Observation

FIREBIRD-II is an identically-instrumented pair of 1.5 U CubeSats (FU3 and FU3), launched on January 31st, 2015. Their polar orbit has an apogee of 632 km and perigee of 433 km, and 99° inclination [Crew *et al.*, 2016]. FU3 and FU4 are flying in a leader-follower configuration with FU4 ahead, to resolve the space-time ambiguity inherent to single spacecraft missions such as SAMPEX.

Each FIREBIRD-II unit has a collimated and a surface solid state detector with complementary fields of view of 45° and 180°. They are observing electron precipitation in six energy channels from ~ 230 keV to > 1 MeV. The adjustable sampling rate is 18.75 ms by default and can be at a fast as 12.5 ms [Crew *et al.*, 2016].

On February 2nd, 2015 at 06:12:50 UT, a microburst with subsequent bounces was observed simultaneously on both spacecraft. Figure 1 shows the electron flux data (HiRes) of the microburst. Five peaks were observed on both spacecraft. On the collimated detector, the microburst was seen up to the fourth energy channel (555 - 771 keV), while on the surface detector it was observed up to the fifth energy channel (683 - 950 keV). Only FU3 has a functioning surface detector, thus only data from the lowest four energy channels of the collimated detectors will be used for this analysis. In addition, since FU4's 5th peak in the fourth energy channel is very noisy, only the first four peaks were used in the spatial scale analysis.

We believe this to be a single microburst since the first peak is not dispersed, but subsequent peaks show some dispersion. No microbursts were observed for 8 s before the event and the count rate was low. This microburst was observed at McIlwain  $L = 4.7$ ,  $MLT = 8.3$ , calculated using the Tsyganenko 1989 (T89) magnetic field model [Tsyganenko, 1989] with the IRBEM library. This event occurred above Sweden, latitude = 63°, longitude = 15°, altitude = 650 km, at the eastern edge of the bounce loss cone (BLC). For this analysis, the BLC is defined as the region where an electron observed at FIREBIRD's altitude will mirror at an altitude < 100 km in the opposite hemisphere, and could be lost due to collisions [Abel and Thorne, 1998]. For this microburst, this altitude was calculated to be 95 km using T89. Electrons mirroring below FIREBIRD will mirror even lower in the opposite hemisphere, and are more likely to be lost.

Lastly, the magnetosphere was mildly disturbed with  $K_p = 4$ , and  $DST = -44$  nT, during the transition between the main and recovery phases.

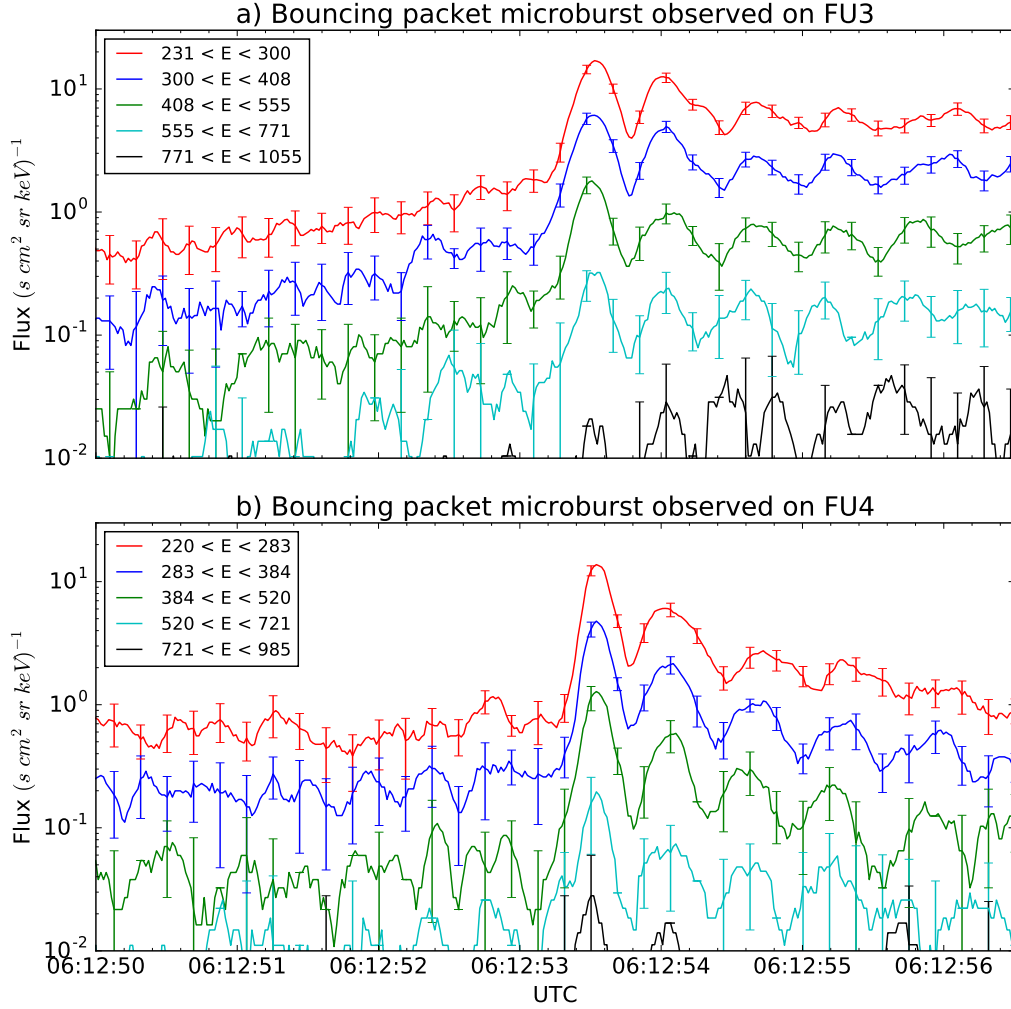
## 3 Analysis

### 3.1 Time and position correction

At the beginning of the FIREBIRD-II mission, there was uncertainty in their separation and their clocks were not synchronized. Our approach to calculate their clock difference  $\delta t_e$ , and in-track time lag  $\delta t_d$ , is a cross-correlation time lag analysis on events that are temporal and spatial. It is believed that these spatial structures are stationary from similar structures observed from > 35 keV to a few hundred keV on the AC-6 CubeSats and their position confirmed with GPS [Blake and O'Brien, 2016]. The difference in the uncorrected observed times of a spatial structure  $\Delta t$ , is related to  $\delta t_e$ ,  $\delta t_d$  via,

$$\Delta t = \delta t_d + \delta t_e. \quad (1)$$

Six coincident microbursts, and two spatial events around this microburst were hand-picked on February 2nd, 2015 for this analysis. The coincident microbursts were linearly fit to account for clock drift and a clock difference of  $\delta t_e = 2.28 \pm 0.12$  s was obtained. This time shift was applied to the HiRes data in Fig. 1. The cross-correlation analysis on the two spatial events yields a time lag of  $\Delta t = 4.92 \pm 0.03$  s. Using these values, and the Two Line



**Figure 1.** HiRes data of the microburst observed at February 2nd, 2015 at 06:12:50 UT, smoothed with a 150 ms window. The subsequent bounces show little energy dispersion. The energy channels' label unit is keV. As discussed in section 3 a time correction of -2.28 s has been applied to FU3. While the flux from five energy channels is shown, only channels with reasonable counting statistics are used for the spatial scale analysis.

Elements (TLE) derived spacecraft velocity,  $v = 7.57 \text{ km/s}$  the calculated spacecraft separation was,

$$d = v \delta t_d = 19.9 \pm 0.9 \text{ km.} \quad (2)$$

An independent method to confirm the cross-correlation derived separation and timing difference was developed. The separation was calculated using TLEs. The TLE released for February 2nd, was anomalous and was not used. Instead, we backpropagated seven TLEs released up to five days after the microburst event, and propagated them with the SGP-4 algorithm. Then the predicted spacecraft separations at the time of the microburst event were averaged to derive a separation of  $d = 18.4 \pm 1.5 \text{ km}$ . The timing difference was calculated using the time stamps of the FIREBIRD-II telemetry beacons during operational passes. Since they had a common time reference, the ground station computer, a time difference  $\delta t_e = 2.45^{+0.51}_{-0.98} \text{ s}$  was derived. These two methods give similar results, which imply that the stationary event assumption used in the cross-correlation time lag analysis, is in fact, a reasonable assumption.

### 3.2 Microburst Scale Sizes

Using the  $\sim 20 \text{ km}$  in-track separation, and the spacecraft motion during the event, microburst scale sizes in LEO and the magnetic equator are calculated. Using the event and orbit topology shown in Fig. 2 and error propagated from the spacecraft separation, the latitudinal scale size is  $> 28.8 \pm 0.8 \text{ km}$ . This scale size is represented by the latitudinal extent of the solid and dashed boxes in Fig. 2.

Since magnetospheric electrons drift eastward and were seen for multiple bounces, it is possible to calculate the longitudinal scale size of the microburst. The distance that the electrons drift azimuthally in a single bounce is given by,

$$d_{az} = 2\pi(R_E + A) \cos(\lambda) \frac{t_b}{< T_d >} \quad (3)$$

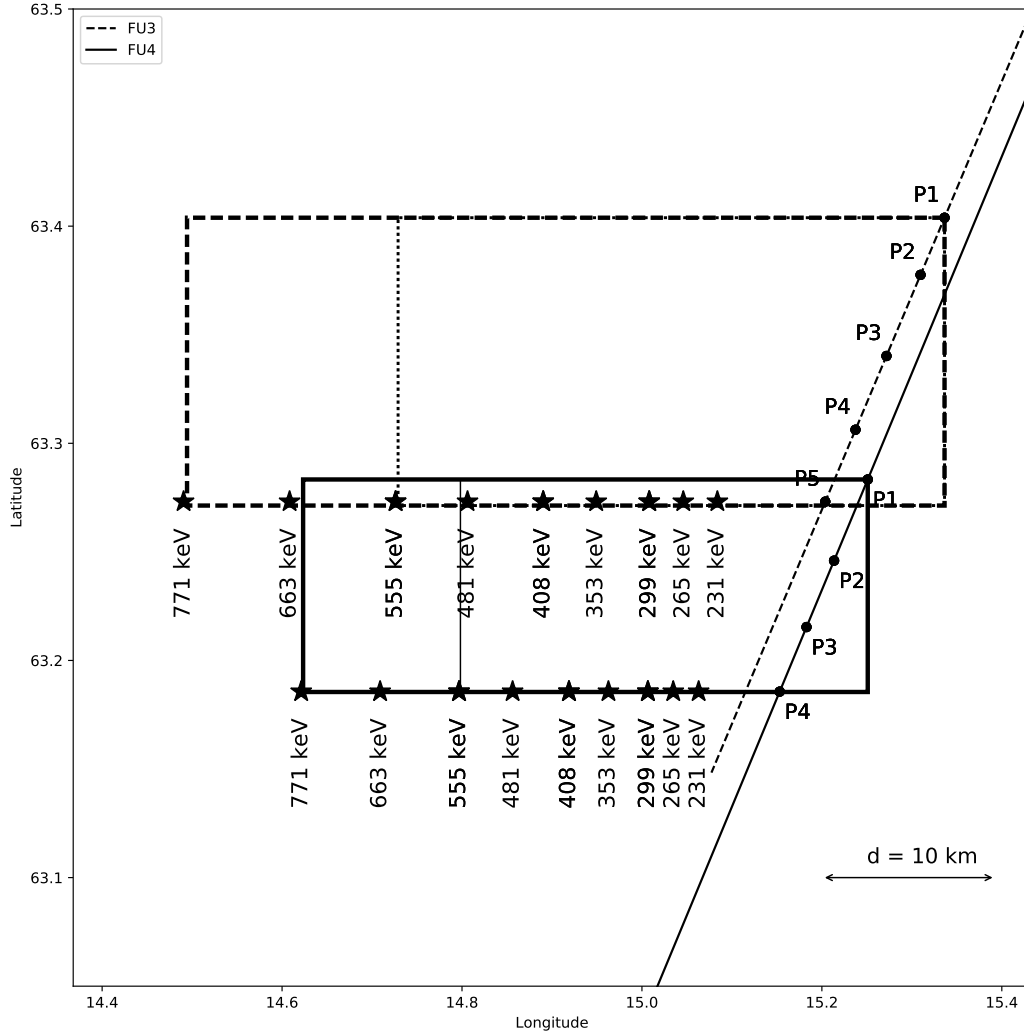
where  $R_E$  is the Earth's radius,  $A$  is the spacecraft altitude,  $\lambda$  is the magnetic latitude,  $t_b$  is the electron bounce period, and  $< T_d >$  is the electron drift period. *Parks* [2003] derived  $< T_d >$  to be,

$$< T_d > \approx \begin{cases} 43.8/(L \cdot E) & \text{if } \alpha_0 = 90^\circ \\ 62.7/(L \cdot E) & \text{if } \alpha_0 = 0^\circ \end{cases} \quad (4)$$

where  $E$  is the electron energy in MeV,  $L$  is the L shell, and  $\alpha_0$  is the equatorial pitch angle. The valid limit for this analysis is  $\alpha_0 = 0^\circ$  since electrons mirroring at FIREBIRD-II have  $\alpha_0 \approx 3.7^\circ$ .

Since FIREBIRD-II saw multiple bounces after the microburst, the longitudinal scale size is the furthest distance that the microburst electrons drifted east and were last seen. This was calculated with  $D_{az} = n d_{az}$ , where  $n$  is the number of bounces observed. Using this methodology, the longitudinal scale size is  $> 38.5 \pm 8.8 \text{ km}$  for the 555 keV electrons and  $> 50.8 \pm 11.4 \text{ km}$  for the 771 keV electrons. The stars with energy labels in Fig. 2 represent the locations of electrons with that energy when the microburst was seen at the first peak (P1), and drifted eastward to be last seen at P5 for FU3 and P4 for FU4.

The longitudinal and latitudinal scale sizes at LEO were mapped to the magnetic equator using the T89 magnetic field model. The radial scale size (latitudinal scale mapped from LEO) is  $> 504 \pm 14 \text{ km}$  and azimuthal scale size (longitudinal scale mapped from LEO) of 555 keV electrons is  $> 451 \pm 103 \text{ km}$  and of 771 keV electrons is  $> 530 \pm 119 \text{ km}$ .



**Figure 2.** The topology of the FIREBIRD-II orbit and the bouncing packet microburst projected onto latitude and longitude with axis scaled to equal distance. Attributes relating to FU3 shown with dashed lines, and FU4 with solid lines. The spacecraft path is shown with the diagonal lines, starting at the upper right corner. The labels P(N) indicate where the spacecraft were when the  $N^{th}$  peak was seen in the lowest energy channel in the HiRes data. The stars with the accompanying energy labels represent the locations of the electrons with that energy that started at time of P1, and were seen at the last peak on each spacecraft. The thick (thin) box represents the upper (lower) bound on the microburst scale size, assuming that the majority of the electrons were in the upper (lower) boundary of energy channel 4.

### 3.3 Electron Bounce Period

Lastly, the observed bounce period,  $t_b$  as a function of energy is calculated. To calculate the observed  $t_b$  and uncertainties, the raw HiRes flux was detrended and fitted. The detrending flux (baseline) is defined in *O'Brien et al.* [2004] as the flux at the 10th percentile over a time interval around the point to be detrended. A 0.5 s interval is used in this analysis. The flux was fitted with five Gaussians for FU3, and four for FU4. The fit uncertainty is from the detrended flux and the baseline flux summed in quadrature. Using the fit parameters, the mean  $t_b$  for the lowest four energy channels was calculated and shown in Fig. 3 with rectangles.

The bounces observed with FU3 are right-skewed in the lowest two energy channels. This hints at the underlying distribution of electron flux within the energy channel. Since the peaks are right-skewed, there are more electrons at the higher energy end of the channel. A Gaussian fit cannot account for this skewness, and as a first order correction, minima between peaks was used to calculate  $t_b$ , and is shown in Fig. 3.

Superposed on Fig. 3, are  $t_b$  curves for various models including an analytical solution from *Schulz and Lanzerotti* [1974], and numerical models: T89, Tsyganenko 2004 (T04) [Tsyganenko and Sitnov, 2005], and Olson & Pfizter Quiet [Olson and Pfizter, 1982]. The numerical  $t_b$  curves were calculated using a Python wrapper for IRBEM. It traces the magnetic field line between mirror points, to calculate  $t_b$  assuming conservation of energy and the first adiabatic invariant for locally mirroring electrons.

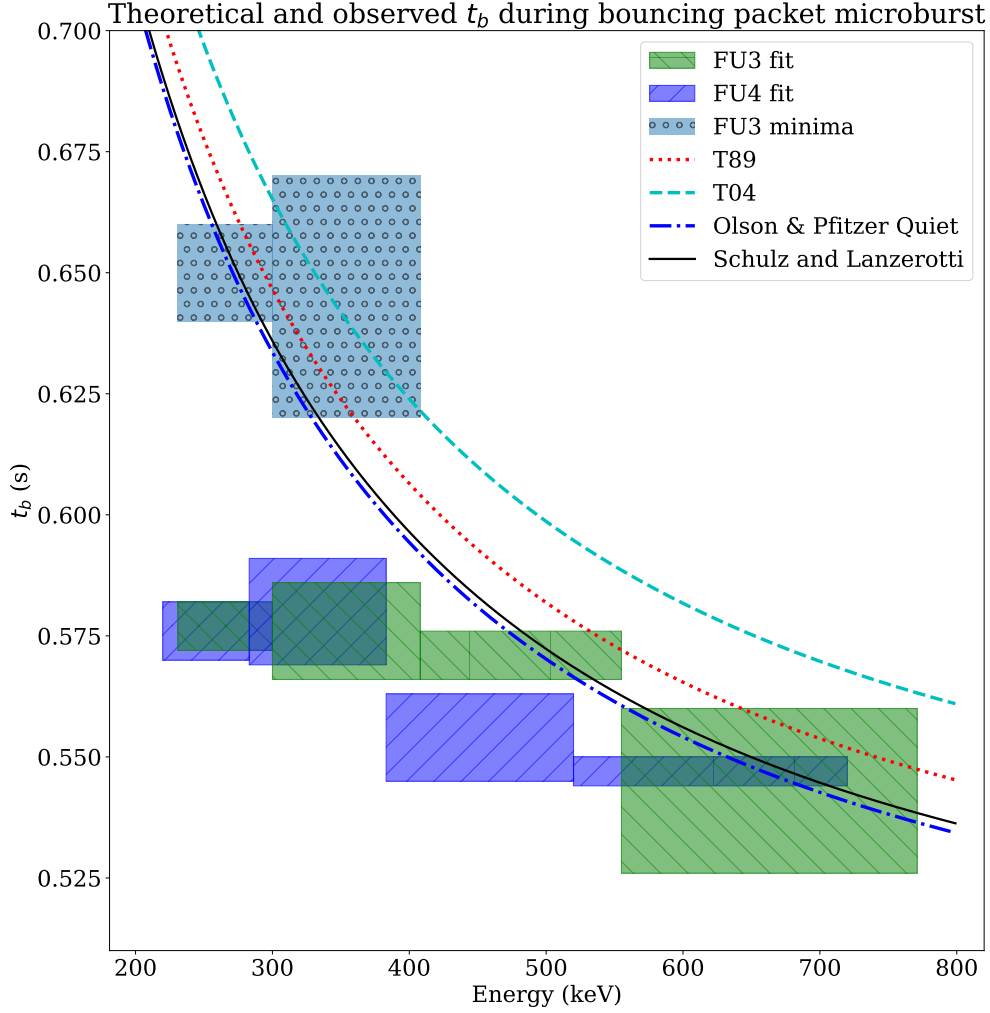
## 4 Discussion

The scale sizes reported in section 3.2 are a lower bound. They are similar to the latitudinal scale size reported in *Blake et al.* [1996], and scale size reported in *Parks* [1967]. Furthermore, the latitudinal scale size in this study is roughly  $\sim 2.6$  times larger than other simultaneous microbursts reported in *Crew et al.* [2016] and  $\sim 10$  times larger than reported in *Dietrich et al.* [2010].

From section 3.2, the microburst scale size at the magnetic equator is similar to the whistler-mode chorus source scale sizes reported in *Agapitov et al.* [2011, 2017]. In *Agapitov et al.* [2011], chorus source scale sizes of  $\sim 600$  km were observed by CLUSTER at  $L \sim 4.5$ . In *Agapitov et al.* [2017], The Van Allen Probes were used to measure source scale sizes of  $\sim 500$  and  $\sim 800$  km for upper and lower band chorus, respectively. This mapping relies on the assumption that the interaction occurred at the magnetic equator. It is possible that the microburst electrons were scattered off the equator [Lorentzen et al., 2001b], but it is outside the scope of this analysis to discern the magnetic latitude of the interaction. Using the evidence from this analysis, this microburst was most likely scattered by a whistler-mode chorus.

Using the fit parameters from section 3.3, the exponential E-folding energy,  $E_0$  is calculated to be  $E_0 \sim 100$  keV. This is similar to the results in *Lee et al.* [2005] who used STSAT-1 and *Datta et al.* [1997] who used a sounding rocket. It is soft for a typical microburst observed with FIREBIRD-II. Thus the lower bound of the scale would be closer to the 555 keV electron's scale. There is no statistically significant change in  $E_0$  for subsequent bounces.

Lastly, the fitted, high energy  $t_b$  shown in Fig. 3 agree well to most models but T04 has the largest discrepancy at lower energies. To get an estimate of the L shell discrepancy  $\Delta L$ , the spacecraft position for T04 is adjusted to give better agreement with the observed  $t_b$ . The adjusted L shell is smaller by  $\Delta L = 0.35$ . On the other hand, the  $t_b$  calculated using the minima in the lowest two energy channels has much better agreement.



**Figure 3.** Observed and theoretical  $t_b$  for electrons of energies from 200 to 770 keV. The solid black line is  $t_b$  in a dipole magnetic field, derived in *Schulz and Lanzerotti* [1974]. The red and cyan dashed lines are the  $t_b$  derived using the T89, and T04 magnetic field models with IRBEM. Lastly, the blue dashed curve is the  $t_b$  derived using the Olson & Pfitzer Quiet model. The green and purple boxes represent the observed  $t_b$  for FU3 and FU4 using a Gaussian fit, respectively. The blue boxes represent the observed  $t_b$  calculated with the minima between the bounces. The width of the boxes represent the width of those energy channels, and the height represents the uncertainty from the fit.



## 5 Conclusions

The bouncing packet microburst observed by both FIREBIRD-II CubeSats shed light on the spatial and temporal properties of microbursts in LEO and the magnetic equator region. Its calculated latitudinal scale size is  $> 28.8 \pm 0.8$  km and the longitudinal scale size  $> 38.5 \pm 8.8$  km at LEO, assuming a soft energy spectra. Using the T89 magnetic field model, these scale sizes were mapped to the magnetic equator. The radial scale size is  $> 504 \pm 14$  km and azimuthal scale size is  $> 451 \pm 103$  km, assuming a soft energy spectra. The similarity of the derived microburst equatorial scale size to the whistler-mode chorus source region scale size, magnetospheric location, and geomagnetic conditions indicate that the microburst electrons were probably scattered by a whistler-mode chorus wave.

Lastly, the observed and theoretical bounce periods agree at high energies, but disagree by as much as  $\sim 20\%$  at the lowest energies that FIREBIRD-II observes. This is partially due to the right-skewness of the peaks for the two lowest energy channels, and it hints at the underlying energy-dependent electron flux in those energy channels. By using the minima method to calculate  $t_b$ , it is in better agreement for those energy channels.

Hopefully, these results will guide future modeling efforts in areas not limited to: estimating particle loss from the radiation belts, wave-particle interactions, and magnetic field modeling. The scale sizes reported in this study are a lower bound, and from previous literature, it is obvious that there is a distribution of microburst scale sizes. A robust distribution cannot be derived from FIREBIRD-II, since they separated quickly in-track, and observed a small number of coincident microbursts. In the follow-up study, a similar analysis will be applied to those microbursts, as well as to microbursts observed with the Aerocube 6 CubeSats.

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