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High-energy neutrinos are expected to be produced in astrophysical objects by the decays of charged pions made in cosmic-ray interactions with radiation or gas [1–4]. As these pions decay, they produce neutrinos with typical energies of 5% compared to those of the cosmic-ray nucleons [5,6]. These neutrinos can travel long distances undisturbed by either the absorption experienced by high-energy photons or the magnetic deflection experienced by charged particles, making them a unique tracer of cosmic-ray acceleration.

Observations since 2008 using the Antarctic gigaton IceCube detector [7] while it was under construction provided several indications of such neutrinos in a variety of channels [8–10]. Two years of data from the full detector, from May 2010 to May 2012, then provided the first strong evidence for the detection of these astrophysical neutrinos.
[11] using an all-flavor all-direction sample of neutrinos interacting within the detector volume. This analysis focused on neutrinos above 100 TeV, at which the expected atmospheric neutrino background falls to the level of one event per year, allowing any harder astrophysical flux to be seen clearly. Here, following the same techniques, we add a third year of data supporting this result and begin to probe the properties of the observed astrophysical neutrino flux.

Neutrinos are detected in IceCube by observing the Cherenkov light produced in ice by charged particles created when neutrinos interact. These particles generally travel distances too small to be resolved individually, and the particle shower is observed only in aggregate. In $\nu_\mu$ charged-current (CC) interactions, however, as well as a minority of $\nu_\tau$ CC, a high-energy muon is produced that leaves a visible track (unless produced on the detector boundary heading outward). Although deposited energy resolution is similar for all events, angular resolution for events that contain visible muon tracks is much better ($\lesssim 1^\circ$, 50% CL) than for those that do not ($\sim 15^\circ$, 50% CL) [12]. For equal neutrino fluxes of all flavors (1:1:1), $\nu_\mu$ CC events make up only 20% of interactions [13].

Backgrounds to astrophysical neutrino detection arise entirely from cosmic-ray air showers. Muons produced by $\pi$ and $K$ decays above IceCube enter the detector at 2.8 kHz. Neutrinos produced in the same interactions [14–17] enter IceCube from above and below, and are seen at a much lower rate due to the low neutrino interaction cross section. Because $\pi$ and $K$ mesons decay overwhelmingly to muons rather than electrons, these neutrinos are predominantly $\nu_\mu$ and usually have track-type topologies in the detector [13]. As the parent meson’s energy rises, its lifetime increases, making it increasingly likely to interact before decaying. Both the atmospheric muon and neutrino fluxes thus become suppressed at high energy, with a spectrum one power steeper than the primary cosmic rays that produced them [18]. At energies above $\sim 100$ TeV, an analogous flux of muons and neutrinos from the decay of charmed mesons is expected to dominate, as the shorter lifetime of these particles allows this flux to avoid suppression from interaction before decay [19–25]. This flux has not yet been observed, however, and both its overall rate and crossover energy with the $\pi/K$ flux are, at present, poorly constrained [26]. As before [11], we estimate all atmospheric neutrino background rates using measurements of the northern-hemisphere $\nu_\mu$ spectrum [9].

Event selection identifies neutrino interactions in IceCube by rejecting those events with Cherenkov-radiating particles, principally cosmic-ray muons, entering from outside the detector. As before, we used a simple anti-coincidence muon veto in the outer layers of the detector [11], requiring that fewer than three of the first 250 detected photoelectrons (PE) be on the detector boundary. To ensure sufficient numbers of photons to reliably trigger this veto, we additionally required at least 6000 PE overall, corresponding to deposited energies of approximately 30 TeV. This rejects all but one part in $10^5$ of the cosmic-ray muon background above 6000 PE while providing a direction and topology-neutral neutrino sample [11]. We use a data-driven method to estimate this background by using one region of IceCube to tag muons and then measuring their detection rate in a separate layer of PMTs equivalent to our veto; this predicts a total muon background in three years of $8.4 \pm 4.2$ events. Rejection of events containing entering muons also significantly reduces downgoing atmospheric neutrinos (the southern hemisphere) by detecting and vetoing muons produced in the neutrinos’ parent air showers [27,28]. This southern-hemisphere suppression is a distinctive and generic feature of any neutrinos originating in cosmic-ray interactions in the atmosphere.

In the full 988-day sample, we detected 37 events (Fig. 1) with these characteristics relative to an expected background of $8.4 \pm 4.2$ cosmic-ray muon events and $6.6^{+1.9}_{-1.6}$ atmospheric neutrinos. Nine were observed in the third year. One of these (event 32) was produced by a coincident pair of background muons from unrelated air showers. This event cannot be reconstructed with a single direction and energy, and is excluded from the remainder of this article where these quantities are required. This event, like event 28, had subthreshold early hits in the IceTop surface array and our veto region, and is likely part of the expected muon background. Three additional downgoing track events are ambiguous; the remainder are uniformly distributed through the detector and appear to be neutrino interactions.

![Figure 1](image.png)

**FIG. 1.** Arrival angles and deposited energies of the events. Cosmic-ray muon background would appear as low-energy track events in the southern sky (bottom). Atmospheric neutrino backgrounds would appear primarily in the northern sky (top), also at low energies and predominantly as tracks. The attenuation of high-energy neutrinos in the Earth is visible in the top right of the figure. One event, a pair of coincident unrelated cosmic-ray muons, is excluded from this plot. A tabular version of these data, including additional information such as event times, can be found in Ref. [29].
A purely atmospheric explanation for these events is strongly disfavored by their properties. The observed deposited energy distribution extends to much higher energies (above 2 PeV, Fig. 2) than expected from the $\pi/K$ atmospheric neutrino background, which has been measured up to 100 TeV [9]. While a harder spectrum is expected from atmospheric neutrinos produced in charmed meson decay, this possibility is constrained by the observed angular distribution. Although such neutrinos are produced isotropically, approximately half [27,28] of those in the southern hemisphere are produced with muons of high enough energy to reach IceCube and trigger our muon veto. This results in a southern hemisphere charm rate 3.6 times higher than our current 90% CL upper limit (a higher energy search [10] also saw none). This may indicate, along with the slight excess in lower energy bins, either a softer spectrum or a cutoff at high energies. Correlated systematic uncertainties in the first few points of the reconstructed spectrum (Fig. 4) arise from the poorly constrained level of the charm atmospheric neutrino background. The presence of this softer ($E^{-2.7}$) component would decrease the nonatmospheric excess at low energies.
FIG. 4. Extraterrestrial neutrino flux ($\nu + \bar{\nu}$) as a function of energy. Vertical error bars indicate the $2\Delta L = \pm 1$ contours of the flux in each energy bin, holding all other values, including background normalizations, fixed. These provide approximate 68% confidence ranges. An increase in the charm atmospheric background to the level of the 90% CL limit from the northern hemisphere $\nu_\mu$ spectrum [9] would reduce the inferred astrophysical flux at low energies to the level shown for comparison in light gray. The best-fit power law is $E^2 \phi(E) = 1.5 \times 10^{-8} (E/100 \text{ TeV})^{-0.3} \text{ GeV cm}^{-2} \text{s}^{-1} \text{sr}^{-1}$.

hardening the spectrum of the remaining data. The corresponding range of best-fit astrophysical slopes within our current 90% confidence band on the charm flux [9] is $-2.0$ to $-2.3$. As the best-fit charm flux is zero, the best-fit astrophysical spectrum is on the lower boundary of this interval at $-2.3$ (solid line, Figs. 2 and 3) with a total statistical and systematic uncertainty of $\pm 0.3$.

To identify any bright neutrino sources in the data, we employed the same maximum-likelihood clustering search as before [11] and searched for directional correlations with TeV gamma-ray sources. For all tests, the test statistic (TS) is defined as the logarithm of the ratio between the best-fit likelihood including a point source component and the likelihood for the null hypothesis, an isotropic distribution [34]. We determined the significance of any excess by comparing to maps scrambled in right ascension, in which our polar detector has uniform exposure.

As in [11], the clustering analysis was run twice, first with the entire event sample, after removing the two events (28 and 32) with strong evidence of a cosmic-ray origin, and second with only the 28 shower events. This controls for bias in the likelihood fit toward the positions of single well-resolved muon tracks. We also conducted an additional test in which we marginalized the likelihood over a uniform prior on the position of the hypothetical point source. This reduces the bias introduced by muons, allowing track and shower events to be used together, and it improves the sensitivity to multiple sources by considering the entire sky rather than the single best point.

Three tests were performed to search for neutrinos correlated with known gamma-ray sources, also using track and shower events together. The first two searched for clustering along the Galactic Plane, with a fixed width of $\pm 2.5^\circ$, based on TeV gamma-ray measurements [35], and with a free width between $\pm 2.5^\circ$ and $\pm 30^\circ$. The last test searched for the correlation between neutrino events and a predefined catalog of potential point sources (a combination of the usual IceCube [36] and ANTARES [37] lists; see Ref. [29]). For the catalog search, the TS value was evaluated at each source location, and the post-trial significance was calculated by comparing the highest observed value in each hemisphere to results from performing the analysis on scrambled data sets.

No hypothesis test yielded statistically significant evidence of clustering or correlations. For the all-sky clustering test (Fig. 5), scrambled data sets produced locations with equal or greater TS 84% and 7.2% of the time for all events and for showerlike events only. As in the two-year data set, the strongest clustering was near the Galactic Center. Other neutrino observations of this location give no evidence for a source [38], however, and no new events were strongly correlated with this region. When using the marginalized likelihood, a test statistic greater than or equal to the observed value was found in 28% of scrambled data sets. The source list yielded $p$ values for the northern and southern hemispheres of 28% and 8%, respectively. Correlation with the Galactic Plane was not significant either: when letting the width float freely, the best fit was $\pm 7.5^\circ$ with a post-trials chance probability of 2.8%, while a fixed width of $\pm 2.5^\circ$ returned a $p$ value of 24%. A repeat of the time clustering search from [11] found no evidence of structure either.

With or without a possible Galactic contributions [39,40], the high Galactic latitudes of many of the highest-energy events (Fig. 5) suggest at least some extragalactic
energies and is disfavored as the sole source at the much lower predictions at 100 TeV; thus, while able to placing them in weak tension with the data. As an example, the possible dropoff at high energies, many involve a central plateau smaller than our observed energy range, and small target mass above the detector.

The neutrino spectrum (Fig. 4) can also be used to constrain source properties. In almost all candidate sources neutrinos would be produced by the interaction of cosmic rays with either radiation or gas. Interactions with radiation (pγ) typically produce a peaked spectrum, reflecting the energy spectrum of the photons; those with gas (pp) produce a smooth power law [5,6]. While pγ models satisfactorily explain some aspects of the data such as the possible dropoff at high energies, many involve a central plateau smaller than our observed energy range, placing them in weak tension with the data. As an example, the pγ AGN spectrum in [45] peaks at several PeV with much lower predictions at 100 TeV; thus, while able to explain the highest energy events, it fits poorly at lower energies and is disfavored as the sole source at the 2σ level with respect to our simple $E^{-2}$ test flux. Gamma-ray burst pγ models such as in [58,59] have energy ranges better aligned with our data, with central plateaus from around 100 TeV to a few PeV, although existing limits from searches for correlations with observed GRBs are more than an order of magnitude below the observed flux [70]. Cosmic-ray interactions with gas, such as predicted around supernova remnants in our and other galaxies, particularly those with high star-forming rates, produce smooth spectra with slopes reflecting post-diffusion cosmic rays (e.g., $E^{-2.2}$ in [66]) and seem to describe the data well. Large uncertainties on both the measured neutrino spectrum and all models prevent any conclusions, however.

The best-fit flux level in our central energy range (10$^{-8}$ GeV cm$^{-2}$ s$^{-1}$ sr$^{-1}$ per flavor) is similar to the Waxman-Bahcall bound [71], the aggregate neutrino flux from charged pion decay in all extragalactic cosmic-ray accelerators if they are optically thin. This bound is derived using the HEALPix [75] package. We thank R. Laha, J. Beacom, K. Murase, S. Razzaque, and N. Harrington for helpful discussions.

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