

Dwarf Planets



There are currently some new ideas about the far reaches of our solar system that are just being developed. NASA has sent successful space probes to gather information about nearby planets like Mercury, Venus, Mars, and Saturn. While astronomers and other scientists are gaining greater understanding of these planets, the celestial bodies beyond planet Neptune are still mysteries yet to be explored. The space probe New Horizons is traveling towards Pluto and is expected to fly by this former planet in 2015.

Pluto was discovered in 1930 and astronomers of the day called it the ninth planet. Now leading astronomers aren't certain that Pluto is really a planet. Pluto is now estimated to be about one-twentieth the size of planet Mercury, the smallest planet in the solar system. In 2006 the International Astronomical Union, a worldwide group of leading astronomers, decided that Pluto should be called a dwarf planet. This is a new term in astronomy as of 2006.

Dwarf planets are like regular planets in two major ways. Dwarf planets revolve in an orbit around the Sun and dwarf planets are round in shape. However, planets have a clean orbit around the Sun. The orbit of a planet doesn't have any debris, or small objects, as part of its orbit but a dwarf planet does.

Dwarf planets like Pluto exist beyond the orbit of Neptune, the eighth and last planet in the solar system. There are many small objects that exist in that area of the solar system. Scientists believe that these are left over pieces from when the solar system formed. This group of objects revolves around the Sun and is known as the Kuiper belt. Pluto is part of the Kuiper belt.

There are now five dwarf planets that have been identified in this outer region of space. They are: Pluto, Eris, Haumea, MakeMake and Ceres. Astronomers predict that there may be as many as forty dwarf planets. Not very much is known about any of these dwarf planets. Discovered in 2005, Eris is larger than Pluto and was briefly called the tenth planet. MakeMake was also discovered in 2005 in the Kuiper belt and is named for a Polynesian god. Haumea was discovered in 2004 in the Kuiper belt. Ceres has been known since 1801 and used to be called a planet, then an asteroid; now it is called a dwarf planet.

