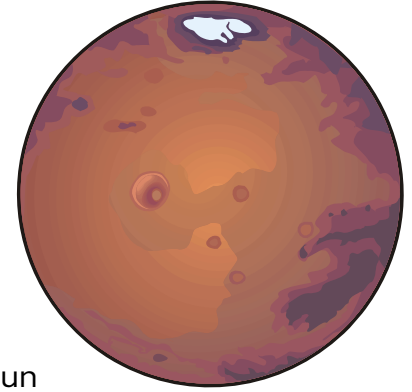


Planet Mars



The U.S. space program run by NASA began exploring the planet Mars in the 1960s. Since then NASA continues sent orbiters and landers to learn more about Mars. There is a great deal of scientific interest in Mars because it is next to Earth in the solar system. Earth is the third planet from the Sun while Mars is the fourth planet in the solar system. Mars has two small moons.

Like the Earth, Mars revolves around the Sun in an elliptical orbit. This oval orbit of Mars is more stretched out than the oval orbit of Earth. When Mars is closest to the Sun, it is 128 million miles away; at its furthest it is almost 155 million miles away from the Sun. It takes Mars 687 Earth days to make one revolution around the Sun. One year on Mars is equal to almost two years on Earth. Mars rotates on its axis creating day and night. One day on Mars is about 24.5 hours long so a day on Mars is about the same as a day on Earth. Mars has seasons like Earth because its axis is tilted about like Earth's axis.

Mars has a thin atmosphere that contains about half as much oxygen as Earth's atmosphere and most of its atmosphere is made up of carbon dioxide. Sometimes Mars has thin clouds made of frozen carbon dioxide and can also have fog and haze. The atmosphere of Mars is clear enough that Mars is visible from Earth through telescopes. With this clear atmosphere the surface of Mars is extremely cold, hundreds of degrees F below zero.

Mars is called the Red Planet because it appears a reddish-orange or rust color from the iron in the soil on its surface. The entire planet is covered with rocks and soil; Mars does not have any bodies of water. Northern Hemisphere of Mars has large flat plains and scientists state that these are flattest and smoothest surface areas of any planet in the solar system.

Mars has deep huge canyons much larger than the Grand Canyon. The mountains and volcanoes on Mars are extremely high. Olympus Mons on Mars is an enormous volcano that is 17 miles high and 370 miles in diameter. Mars has many impact craters; impact craters are the result of meteors striking the surface of Mars earlier in its history. The South Pole of Mars has an ice cap. Mars is known for having gigantic dust storms that cover the entire planet.

