

Dwarf Planet Pluto

Ask your parents or grandparents and they will probably tell you that there are nine planets in our solar system and the last planet, the one furthest away from the Sun, is named Pluto. Pluto was discovered in 1930 by an American astronomer, Clyde W. Tombaugh. He used a powerful telescope to search the sky in a location predicted to contain another planet by American astronomer Percival Lowell in 1905. Lowell died in 1916 before he could find the planet himself.



Since then knowledge about our solar system has increased tremendously. In the 1950s space exploration began with the first orbiting satellites and within a short while the United States and the Soviet Union were sending spacecraft on missions to explore the planets. Pluto exists a tremendous distance away from the Sun, about 3.6 billion miles. Earth is just 93 million miles away from the Sun. Very little is known about Pluto because it is so far away. NASA launched the New Horizons space probe in 2006 and it is expected to reach Pluto in 2015.

Since Pluto is so far from the Sun, it takes about 248 Earth years to make one revolution around the Sun. While observing Pluto astronomers discovered that Pluto's orbit crosses Neptune's orbit. Neptune is the eighth planet away from the Sun and Pluto's neighbor. Astronomers found that Pluto spent 20 years, from 1979 until 1999, closer to the Sun than Neptune. No other planets cross into each other's orbits.

Astronomers believe that the diameter of Earth is about five times larger than the diameter of Pluto. Since Pluto is so small, it has been called a dwarf planet. Pluto appears brown when viewed from space and it is believed to be the coldest spot in the solar system. Pluto exists in an area of the solar system with lots of small icy objects that are revolving around the Sun. This group of objects is called the Kuiper belt. Should Pluto be called a dwarf planet or is it just a large object that is part of the Kuiper belt?

The International Astronomical Union is an association of professional and highly educated astronomers from around the world. In 2006 this group declared that Pluto should not be called a planet but is a dwarf planet. There are now officially eight planets in the solar system.

