

Astronomy for Kids - Pluto

Small, Cold, Dark and Lonely Pluto

The last member of our family of planets is Pluto. At an average distance of over three billion miles from the Sun, Pluto, and its tiny moon Charon, are very much off by themselves. Pluto is so small that six moons of the solar system are larger than this small planet.

As a matter of fact, there has been a lot of discussion about whether Pluto is a planet at all, given the fact that it is so tiny and its orbit is both an exaggerated ellipse and doesn't fall into the same plane as the orbits of the rest of the planets. If we had it to do over again, Pluto would probably not be classified as a planet, but as a large asteroid. We have been calling it a planet for so long it seems like a shame to change it now, though.

Pluto Facts	
Average Distance from Sun	Approximately 3.6 billion miles
Number of Moons	One
Diameter	1417 miles
Length of Day	Over 6 Earth days
Length of Year	248 Earth years
Name	Comes from the Roman god of the underworld.

An Unknown Icy World

Pluto is so far away that even the mighty Hubble Space Telescope can't get us a very good picture. The image at right is the best image to date we have of this distant world. Very little is known about Pluto except that it is very, very cold and exceptionally dark. At this distance, the Sun is very much like all the rest of the stars you would see from its surface.

Pluto was discovered in 1938 by Clyde Tombaugh, who was working at the Percival Lowell observatory in Arizona at the time. There was a lot of discussion about what to name the new planet, but they eventually settled on Pluto, which had been suggested by a schoolgirl from England. It is unknown whether she got the idea from the Disney character of the same name.

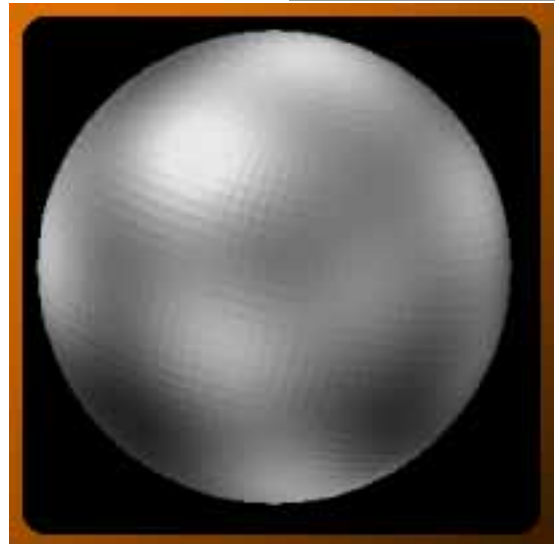


Image courtesy of: Hubble Space Telescope

A Moon Almost as Big as the Planet

Tiny Pluto has a moon which is a little over half the size of the planet itself. In all our solar system, no moon is this close in size to its parent planet. This may, or may not, mean that Charon itself is another asteroid that was captured as it flew by Pluto. There are many such examples of this in our solar system, but we just don't know enough about Pluto to say for sure.

All of the questions we have about this tiny world will likely remain unanswered until we can send a spacecraft to study it. Given the distance to the planet, its size and the expense of mounting such a mission, this is pretty unlikely in the near future.



Image courtesy of: Hubble Space Telescope

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Find Out More About Pluto

[Pluto Page at the Nine Planets Site](#)

The Pluto section of the Nine Planets site has more detail about this tiny world.

[New Horizons Mission to Pluto](#)

There is study being done now for a proposed mission to Pluto and the Kuiper Belt. If this mission is approved, it will launch in 2006 and arrive at Pluto between 2015 and 2017.