

Solar System Exploration

Planets

Sitemap

SSE Home > Planets > Pluto > Overview

Search

Home

News & Events

Planets

Our Solar System

Sun

Mercury

Venus

Earth

Earth's Moon

Mars

Asteroids

Meteoroids

Jupiter

Saturn

Uranus

Neptune

Pluto

Overview

Moons

Gallery

Facts & Figures

Kid's Eye View

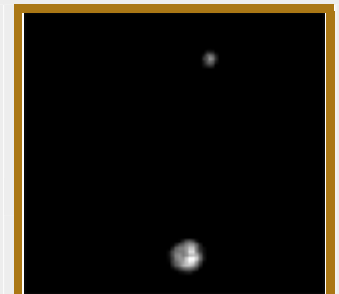
Pluto:

Long considered to be the smallest, coldest, and most distant planet from the Sun, Pluto may also be the largest of a group of objects that orbit in a disc-like zone of beyond the orbit of [Neptune](#) called the [Kuiper Belt](#). This distant region consists of thousands of miniature icy worlds with diameters of at least 1,000 km and is also believed to be the source of some [comets](#).

Discovered by American astronomer Clyde Tombaugh in 1930, Pluto takes 248 years to orbit the Sun. Pluto's most recent close approach to the Sun was in 1989. Between 1979 and 1999, Pluto's highly elliptical orbit brought it closer to the Sun than Neptune, providing rare opportunities to study this small, cold, distant world and its companion moon, [Charon](#).

Most of what we know about Pluto we have learned since the late 1970s from Earth-based observations, the Infrared Astronomical Satellite (IRAS), and the [Hubble Space Telescope](#). Many of the key questions about Pluto, Charon, and the outer fringes of our solar system await close-up observations by a robotic space flight mission.

No spacecraft have yet visited Pluto. However, NASA is currently launching a mission called [New Horizons](#) that will explore both Pluto and the Kuiper Belt region. It is scheduled to launch January, 2006.



Pluto and Charon are tough to see even with the best telescopes.

[Read More About Pluto](#)

Just the Facts

Metric | English | Scientific Notation

Distance from the Sun: 5,906,380,000 km

Equatorial Radius: 1,151 km

Volume: 6,390,000,000 km³

Resources

- [Missions to Pluto](#)
- [Pluto Portal \(Southwest Research Institute\)](#)
- [The Nine Planets: Pluto](#)
- [StarDate: Pluto](#)
- [Welcome to the Planets](#)

- [Comets](#)
- [Kuiper Belt](#)
- [Beyond Our Solar System](#)
- [Featured Question](#)
- [Solar System 101](#)
- [Missions](#)
- [Science & Technology](#)
- [Multimedia](#)
- [People](#)
- [Kids](#)
- [Education](#)
- [History](#)

Mass: 13,000,000,000,000,000,000 kg

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