

PLUTO

Pluto is the most distant of the planets, yet the eccentricity of its orbit periodically carries it inside Neptune's orbit, where it has been since 1979 and where it will remain until March 1999. Pluto's orbit is also highly inclined, tilted 17 degrees to the orbital plane of the other planets.

Discovered in 1930, Pluto appears to be little more than a celestial snowball. The planet's diameter is calculated to be approximately 2,300 kilometers (1,430 miles), only two-thirds the size of our Moon. Ground-based observations indicate that Pluto's surface is covered with methane ice and that there is a thin atmosphere that may freeze and fall to the surface as the planet moves away from the Sun. Observations also show that Pluto's spin axis is tipped by 122 degrees.

The planet has one known satellite, Charon, discovered in 1978. Charon's surface composition is different from Pluto's; the moon appears to be covered with water-ice rather than methane ice. Its orbit is gravitationally locked with Pluto, so both bodies always keep the same hemisphere facing each other. Pluto's and Charon's rotational period and Charon's period of revolution are all 6.4 Earth days.

Although no spacecraft have ever visited Pluto, NASA is currently exploring the possibility of such a mission.

- * Pluto is named for the Greek god of wealth.
- * Pluto is the ninth planet from the Sun.
- * Pluto has nothing in common with gas giants.
- * One day on Pluto equals 6 Earth days, 9 hours, and 18 minutes.
- * The diameter of Pluto is 2,170 miles.
- * Pluto's surface gravity is .05 of Earth's gravity
- * Pluto's surface temperature is -369° F.
- * The atmosphere on Pluto has not been detected.
- * Pluto, the smallest known planet, is about the size of Earth's moon.
- * This planet's orbit takes it inside the orbit of Neptune.
- * Pluto's one moon, Charon, was discovered in 1978 and is about half the size of Pluto.
- * By the end of this century, Pluto will be the only planet not visited by a space probe.

Source: NASA