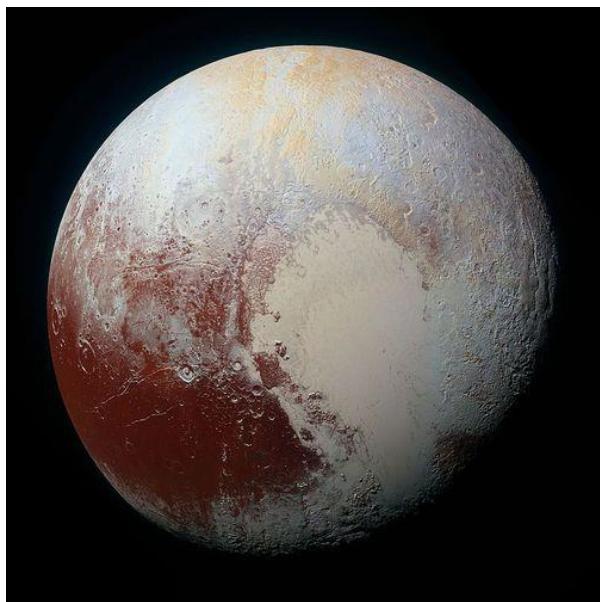


Pluto: The Planet That Wasn't

Poor Pluto!

It's bad enough to be the runt of the group, but to be told after 75 years that you're not even a member of the club - what an insult!



Pluto was first discovered in 1930. Until 2006, students were taught that it was the ninth and smallest planet in the solar system. Smaller than Earth's moon, it is not even as wide as the United States.

Pluto is made up almost entirely of rock and ice. It is so far away from Earth that the NASA New Horizons spacecraft took almost 10 years to get very close to it. Pluto's full orbit around the sun lasts almost 250 Earth years!

But as small as it is, as cold as it is, as far from the sun as it is, for all those years it was considered the ninth planet of the solar system... until Eris came around.

Eris was discovered in 2005. It is about the same size as Pluto. And like Pluto, it is part of the Kuiper Belt, a ring of objects that circle the outer edge of the solar system.

After Eris was discovered, scientists had to make a decision. Either Eris was the 10th planet in the solar system or it was not a planet at all! And if Eris weren't a planet, could Pluto be considered one?

Scientists made new rules for what is counted as a planet, and decided that neither Pluto nor Eris qualified.

A new category was created: dwarf planet. The official list of planets in the solar system went from nine to eight, and Pluto and Eris became members of the dwarf planet club. So long for Planet Pluto—but at least it no longer has to be the littlest guy in the club. In fact, Pluto is one of the bigger dwarf planets! Maybe Pluto doesn't have it so bad after all.

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