

Pluto barks again



Before we pounce into the details on why Pluto was downgraded to a dwarf planet, or take a gander at the cool new pictures New Horizons has sent back. Let's return to those days when Pluto stood tall and true as a planet – a really small one, but a planet nonetheless.

Off the top, the “pooch planet” had nothing to do with Walt Disney. It was discovered on February 18, 1930 by a young assistant working at Lowell

Observatory. His name was Clyde Tombaugh and after a year of reviewing images taken through the observatory's giant refracting telescope he finally spotted a tiny dot of light that moved.

Quick Smarts

Distance from Earth - 7.5 billion km*

Distance from Sun – 7.38 billion km*

Size VS Earth

Orbital Period – 248 Earth years

Length of day – 6d, 9h, 17min

Temperature – minus 229° C

Moons - five

Atmosphere – Very thin and toxic

Solar System position – Kuiper Belt

*** Farthest distance**

Tombaugh was using a machine called a blink comparator which shifted back and forth between two photographic plates taken separately the same night. If there was movement spotted against the static background stars it was probably a planet.

After watching and carefully investigating that small segment of the sky for another month, Lowell Observatory proudly announced that it had discovered the 9th planet.



Clyde Tombaugh at the Blink Comparator used to find Pluto.

The name came later when an 11 year-old English schoolgirl named Venetia Burney suggested the name Pluto because it was distant, dark and cold like the god of the dead who she had been reading about in her book of Greek mythology. She suggested it to her father who was the librarian at Oxford University. He forwarded the name on to the Lowell Observatory director who liked it and the name stuck.

Speculation has it that the name took root so quickly because the first two letters “PL” also stood for Percival Lowell who established the observatory. Also, if you overlap the letters P and L you have the symbol for Pluto - ♇.

The cartoon character Pluto was created in 1930 as Mickey Mouse’s pet. He didn’t become a full-fledged member of the Disney stable until 1937. That was the year Disney debuted the first cartoon starring Pluto. Any relationship between the cartoon character and the Dwarf Planet is purely coincidental – at least according to Disney Studios.

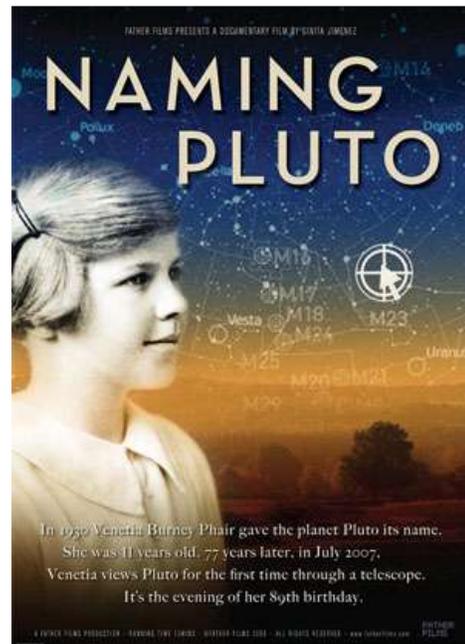
The radio active element Plutonium, however does owe a tip of the hat to Pluto the Dwarf Planet. After all, the discovery of Pluto was hot news during the 1930s.

Yet another product called Pluto Water pre-existed both the planet and the dog. It was a laxative with the slogan “When nature won’t, Pluto will.”

Now let’s get back to Astronomy. There are a few odd things about Pluto.

For starters it rotates backwards – that is from east to west. So you’d see the Sun rise in the west and set in the east – just like on Venus. Were you to look towards the Sun you’d see a very bright star-like object, but nothing like our view of the Sun. In fact daytime on Pluto is very much like a very dark cloudy day on Earth. So cancel that Suntan lotion

In addition to rotating backwards, Pluto has a very elliptical orbit. Pluto’s orbit actually crosses the orbit of Neptune for a 20 year period. No other planet or dwarf



Venetia Burney who named Pluto in 1931.

planet does that. And while we're talking about Pluto's orbit, it is also inclined 17 degrees from the orbital plain of the rest of the planets.



Those who remember the blurry images that Hubble took of Pluto should be astounded at this image taken by New Horizons. The fly-by mission is now millions of kilometres beyond Pluto and moving into the Kuiper Belt. This marks humanities first steps into deep space.