THE SOLAR SYSTEM · PART 4 OF 9 · AGES 11–16

Moons, Dwarf Planets, Asteroids and Comets

The Sun and eight planets are only part of the story. These are the other kinds of object in the Solar System.

Dwarf planets

Round worlds that orbit the Sun but share their orbit with other objects. Five are officially named: Ceres, Pluto, Haumea, Makemake and Eris.

Moons

Natural satellites that orbit planets, dwarf planets or asteroids. Jupiter's Ganymede is the largest, bigger than Mercury. Many are only a few kilometres across.

Asteroids

Rocky or metal leftovers from the birth of the planets. Most orbit in the main belt between Mars and Jupiter, which holds 1.1 to 1.9 million asteroids over 1 km wide.

Comets

Lumps of ice and dust a few kilometres wide. Near the Sun the ice turns to gas, making a glowing coma and tails that always point away from the Sun.

Kuiper Belt objects

Millions of icy bodies in a thick ring beyond Neptune, from about 30 to 50 AU. Pluto is the largest. Many short-period comets come from here.

Oort Cloud

A vast, distant shell of icy objects thought to surround the Solar System, from about 5,000 to 100,000 AU. Long-period comets fall in from here.

Meteoroids, meteors, meteorites

A meteoroid is a small space rock. When it burns up in Earth's air, the streak of light is a meteor. Any piece that reaches the ground is a meteorite.

Leftovers tell the story

Asteroids, comets and many meteorites have changed little since the Solar System formed 4.6 billion years ago. Studying them is like reading the planets' building instructions.

NEXT IN THE SERIES

5. How the Solar System Formed

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