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A Planet Called 'Jennifer'?

From: **John Joseph Mercieca** <mufor@malta.net.omnes.net>
Date: Mon, 20 Jan 1997 16:36:37 +0100
Fwd Date: Wed, 22 Jan 1997 08:33:18 -0500
Subject: A Planet Called 'Jennifer'?

The Electronic Telegraph

UK News

Sunday 19 January 1997

Back-garden stargazer pinpoints new planet

By John Gaskell

A BACK garden astronomer has discovered an unknown planet which the world's most powerful telescopes have missed.

A lifelong amateur, George Sallit, 44, the head of radiation safety at Aldermaston, suspected he had found something new at the end of October.

Now he is sure of his find but must wait until he can ascertain its orbit so that his discovery can be confirmed. At the Harvard Smithsonian Centre for Astrophysics in Washington yesterday, Dr Brian Marsden, the director of the Minor Planets Centre, said that he will urge Mr Sallit to try to keep track of 1996TF15, as the centre labels it, so that it can be validated.

"The object was followed by him for 27 days in October but if he could keep track of it now then we would have an arc of three months to give us a much better orbit and the possibility of finding it more easily," Dr Marsden said.

Minor planets, of which the largest is Ceres with a 1,000km diameter, are usually located in the asteroid belt between Mars and Jupiter.

They are normally found by professionals. Mr Sallit is among only four British amateurs this century to have discovered one.

"I was ecstatic, really pleased, because I had spent so long looking and finding nothing," he said last week.

Mr Sallit was 11 when his parents bought him his first telescope.

"As a child I would look at the stars and think: 'Gosh, this is interesting. I could learn something about this.' It's one of the only subjects where you can go out and find something that has never been seen before. As far as I am concerned, my planet is quite an achievement and proof that amateurs have something to contribute."

Computers have given amateurs the chance to compete against professionals. Mr Sallit's is linked to a 12in-diameter telescope and an ex-Nasa electronic camera in his purpose-built observatory at the bottom of his garden at Bradfield, Berks.

"Blink Comparison" software compares series of photographs of the sky taken at hourly intervals and discerns any movement.

Because the orbit of a new planet is unknown it takes hours of calculation to

be sure that a discovery has been made. "It's difficult to say exactly when it will reappear this year," Mr Sallit said. "It depends on the brightness of the objects and how far over the horizon they are, and, of course, the weather."

Soon he should have the distinction of being allowed to name his planet. "Perhaps I shall call it Jennifer, after my wife, to get my priorities right," he said.

- end -

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