

I apologize for this column's tardiness. There was a death in my family which put me behind on the month's tasks. Thank you for your patience!

Planetary Wonderings
May Focus: Phoenix Mars Mission
By Mary-Frances Bartels, NASA Solar System Ambassador

Have you noticed one of JPL's newest missions in the news lately? It is the Phoenix Mars Mission. Launched in August 2007, the PMM is the first in NASA's Scout Program. It combines the missions of two previous missions --- the 1998 Mars Polar Lander that crashed and 2001 Mars Survey Lander that was cancelled. This three-month mission is to study the history of water and habitability potential in the Martian arctic's ice-rich soil. The spacecraft will land farther north on Mars than any previous probe.

Phoenix has much to accomplish during its short lifespan. It will collect weather-related data such as air temperature and pressure, wind, and humidity. Like other missions, it has a camera and will be able to take stereo images. On the more "exotic side" it also has a robotic arm to dig, scrape, and grind samples. Scientists expect to find an ice-rich layer lying within inches of the surface. The craft also has a gas analyzer and a self-contained chemistry lab complete with microscope.

On Sunday evening, May 25, 2008, the NASA Phoenix spacecraft will arrive at Mars. Live news briefings and commentary of the event begins on NASA TV at 3:00 PM EDT with actual landing coverage beginning at 6:30 PM. A briefing covering the first collected data is scheduled for 9:30 PM. NASA TV may be accessed via cable and satellite TV systems or online at <http://www.nasa.gov/multimedia/nasatv/>.

Resource of the Month: Visit PMM's educational website at <http://phoenix.lpl.arizona.edu/classroom.php> where one can find lesson plans, activities, and other classroom materials. An interactive map will soon be available. Alternatively, PMM has a special site for kids at <http://phoenix.lpl.arizona.edu/kids.php> where one may find specially composed music for Mars, artwork, and essays written by children. Learn more about Steve the Cat's trip to the Red Planet or follow the travels of Phil the Phoenix bird.

Activity of the Month: Here are some trivia questions pertaining to Mars. See how many you can answer. Research Mars and the Phoenix mission and come up with trivia questions of your own.

1. What famous story about Mars was turned into a musical? Who masterminded this project?
2. Can you name at least five video games based, at least in part, on exploration of Mars?
3. What publishing house created a Mars exploration game that uses cardboard pieces based on real maps of the red planet?
4. Did you know that you can download the same software NASA uses to control the Mars Exploration Rovers? What is its name?
5. How many missions to Mars have there been? How many of these have been successful?

Suggestions, questions, and comments about "Planetary Wonderings" are welcomed and may be directed to stargazer @ keeplookingup.net (remove spaces). Past columns may be found at www.keeplookingup.net (all past columns, click on "Planetary Wonderings" on the right side of

opening screen) and at <http://www.freelists.org/archives/astronomyed/> (columns from Jan. 2007 to the present).

Remember to *keep looking up!*

Sources: Various NASA e-mails

<http://phoenix.lpl.arizona.edu/mission.php>

http://www.nasa.gov/multimedia/nasatv/MM_NTV_Breaking.html

http://www.nasa.gov/mission_pages/phoenix/main/index.html