

Offered Title: How To Make A Planet – ‘Take One’

Not every object out there can be a planet, just ask Pluto.

Planetary status was ripped from Pluto, just as the Oscar was ripped from the hands of La La Land. It was there, then it was gone. The Oscar wasn't controversial, just a goof up. Planetary status...well, a little bit controversial.

Since I brought up Pluto, a little history. Pluto was the last “planet” and first Kuiper Belt object discovered. The Kuiper Belt is a ring of objects outside the orbit of Neptune. It is like the asteroid belt between Mars and Jupiter, but contains larger bodies, like Pluto! Pluto was discovered by Clyde Tombaugh in 1930 and named via a contest by Venetia Burney, an 11-year-old girl in Oxford, England. Pluto is the Greek god of the underworld. So...what happened to Pluto the planet? In 2006, at the International Astronomical Union's (IAU) General Assembly the IAU defined the term “planet”, and Pluto was out. The reason they decided to develop a definition after all these years was the discovery of Kuiper Belt objects Sedna in 2003, then Eris in 2005. These objects appeared similar in nature to Pluto. Given Pluto's unusual orbit with respect to the other planets and its location at the inner edge of the Kuiper belt, some thought Pluto might be a Kuiper belt object vs a planet. A debate raged and the definition emerged, not without dissent however.

Let's see what it takes to make a planet, for now:

- It is a celestial body that orbits the Sun
- It has sufficient mass for its self-gravity to overcome rigid body forces so that it assumes hydrostatic equilibrium (spherical or ellipsoid)
- It has cleared the neighborhood around its orbit

Pluto missed the third requirement for planethood and is now called a dwarf planet. But hold on to your knickers, this decision is being challenged by the astronomy community with suggestions for modification and/or clarification. One big concern; recent observations suggest that a large body (as large as Neptune) resides in the Kuiper belt. Its orbit around the Sun would be soooo long that it does not have time to clear its neighborhood, and therefore fails the third criteria for planethood. This does not sit well with many astronomers, so It's not over yet baby blue. Stay tuned.

What's in the Sky?

Get your binoculars out again.

With the springtime sky creeping in from the east, we will be losing a couple of lovely sights in the west soon.

- M45, The Pleiades: look high in the western sky. This smudgy cluster becomes a clutch of diamonds in binoculars.
- NGC 869 & 884, The Double Cluster: Find the misshapen W or M of Cassiopeia, now on its side, low in the northwest. Scan a bit to the upper left from the two end stars sticking up. It's subtler than the Pleiades but there are two of them close together, making a nice view.