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PROJECTS VULCANOIDS

Vulcanoids are small, rocky bodies that circle the Sun in stable orbits inside the orbit of Mercury -- at least that's what they would probably look like if any astronomer had ever seen one. Being small, faint objects, orbiting in the immediate vicinity of the Sun, Vulcanoids are easily lost in the blinding solar glare and cannot be viewed with ordinary Earth-based telescopes. They have proven to be some of the most elusive objects in the solar system, foiling every attempt to observe them.



In 2003, Researchers Alan Stern and Dan Durda, of the Space Science Department at the Southwest Research Institute (SwRI) in Boulder, Colorado, asked for support from The Planetary Society to fly a sensitive camera called VULCAM aboard a rocket on a brief, 10-minute suborbital flight. With the generous support of members of The Planetary Society, and a matching grant from Society supporter Mark Gelfand, Stern and Durda launched their rocket on January 16, 2004. The flight carried the camera above Earth's atmosphere and acquired more than 50,000 images of the region that should have contained Vulcanoids. Unfortunately, a technical problem prevented these images from revealing any Vulcanoids.

"Any Vulcanoids that may wander the inner frontier of the solar system elude us still," Durda wrote in [an article for The Planetary Report](#). "It's clear that future Vulcanoid searches using the Earth's limb to block the Sun will have to pay close attention to beating the problem of scattered light from the twilight limb. We won't be throwing in the towel on the search for Vulcanoids anytime soon. This is a challenging observational problem we want to solve, and knowing once and for all whether any Vulcanoids exist today—and what their properties are—is important to planetary science."

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