Poor, poor Pluto. Scientists now say it’s not a true planet. Since 2006, they have called Pluto a dwarf planet. They believe Pluto is too small and its orbit around the sun too irregular to be the ninth planet in our solar system.

Pluto is so far away from Earth that it can’t be seen without a telescope. It was only formally discovered in 1930. That’s when powerful telescopes took the first photographs of Pluto. The news made huge headlines throughout the world. Scientists received hundreds of suggestions of what to name the new planet. An eleven-year-old girl from England had the winning idea. She suggested Pluto, the name of the Roman god of the underworld. She thought the name made sense because Pluto is a dark and icy place.

For a long time, scientists didn’t know very much about Pluto. However, in 2015, NASA’s New Horizons traveled within 7,800 miles (12,550 km) of the mysterious planet. For the first time, a spacecraft was close enough to the planet to take photos that showed details of the planet. The photos revealed huge ice mountains and volcanoes. They also showed a heart-shaped marking, which is a large plain of nitrogen ice.

Even as we continue to learn more about Pluto, people won’t be stepping foot on it. Pluto is so far away from the sun that its surface is one of the coldest in our entire solar system. With an average temperature of -387 degrees Fahrenheit (-232 degrees Celsius), humans couldn’t survive on this chilly planet.

Moons of Pluto

So far, astronomers have found five moons that orbit Pluto. Charon, the largest, was discovered in 1978. Two smaller moons were discovered in 2005. They were named Nix and Hydra. In 2011, another of Pluto’s moons, Kerberos, was discovered. Most recently, Styx was discovered in 2012.

Do you think scientists will find any more?
Pluto

By Cynthia Sherwood

1. Tell whether each fact is true or false.

_________  Pluto’s heart-shaped marking is made up of nitrogen ice.

_________  Pluto’s temperatures reach up to 387 degrees Fahrenheit.

2. What are the names of Pluto’s five moons?

______________________________________________________________________________
______________________________________________________________________________

3. How long ago was Pluto first discovered?

a. about 120 years ago
b. about 90 years ago
c. about 30 years ago
d. about 5 years ago

4. Pluto was named after ...

a. an 11 year-old girl
b. the Roman god of the underworld
c. a famous scientist
d. a cartoon dog

5. Jimmy told his teacher that he was laying on the grass looking up at the stars last night when he saw Pluto in the sky. His teacher didn’t believe him. Why?

______________________________________________________________________________
______________________________________________________________________________
______________________________________________________________________________

Close-up of Pluto’s surface
Pluto

By Cynthia Sherwood

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   False         Pluto’s temperatures reach up to 387 degrees Fahrenheit.

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   Pluto is too small and far away to be seen without a telescope.