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Pegasus abort

During the final seconds prior to the planned launch of the Space Technology 5 mission on March 15, a retention pin that holds the starboard-side fin aerosurface on the Pegasus rocket first stage did not retract. That forced the launch team to call an abort. This movie shows the scrub as it happened.



■ [Play video](#)

Shuttle launch delay

Space Shuttle Program Manager Wayne Hale announces his decision to replace suspect fuel-level sensors inside the liquid hydrogen portion of Discovery's external tank. The three-week job means Discovery will miss its May launch window, delaying the second post-Columbia test flight.

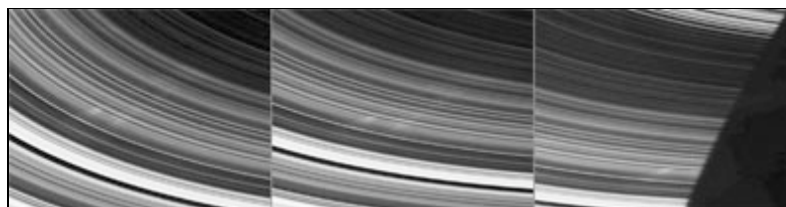


Weird Saturn ring spokes may return in July

UNIVERSITY OF COLORADO-BOULDER NEWS RELEASE

Posted: March 16, 2006

Unusual spokes that appear fleetingly on the rings of Saturn only to disappear for years at a time may become visible again by July, according to a new study spearheaded by the University of Colorado at Boulder.



Credit: NASA/JPL/Space Science Institute
Download larger image version [here](#)

The spokes, which are up to 6,000 miles long and 1,500 miles in width, were first spotted 26 years ago by the Voyager spacecraft, said CU-Boulder Professor Mihaly Horanyi of the Laboratory for Atmospheric and Space Physics. But when the Cassini spacecraft arrived at Saturn in July of 2004, the striking radial features that cut across Saturn's ring plane were nowhere to be found -- an event that disappointed and puzzled many scientists, he said.

The Hubble Space Telescope occasionally observed the ring spokes in the late 1990s, said Horanyi, a professor of physics at CU-Boulder. But the spokes gradually faded, a result of Saturn's seasonal, orbital motion and its tilted axis of rotation that altered the light-scattering geometry.

"The spokes were switched off by the time Cassini arrived," said Horanyi. "We think it is a seasonal phenomena related to the sun rising and setting over the ring plane that changes the physical environment there, making it either friendly or hostile to their formation."

A paper on the subject appears in the March 17 issue of Science magazine. The paper was authored by doctoral student Colin Mitchell and Horanyi of CU-Boulder's LASP, Ove Havnes of the University of Trosmo in Norway and

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SFN+Plus Video clip of the day



STS-115: Canadian Space Agency astronaut Steve MacLean will serve as mission specialist No. 4

Columbia test flight to the next daylight period opening July 1. Hale made the announcement during a news conference from Johnson Space Center on March 14.

■ Dial-up video:
[Part 1](#) | [Part 2](#)

■ Broadband video:
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Stardust science

NASA's Stardust spacecraft



returned to Earth in January with the first samples ever retrieved from a comet. This briefing with mission scientists held March 13 from the Johnson Space Center offers an update on the initial research into the comet bits.

■ Dial-up video:
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■ Broadband video:
[Part 1](#) | [Part 2](#)

Exploring Enceladus

The Cassini spacecraft



orbiting the planet Saturn has found evidence indicating pockets of liquid water may exist near the surface on the icy moon Enceladus, raising the question of whether the small world could support life. This movie includes

Carolyn Porco of the Space Science Institute in Boulder.

The spokes are made up of tiny dust particles less than a micron in width - - about 1/50th the width of a human hair -- that collect electrostatic charges in the plasma environment of the rings and become subject to electrical and magnetic forces, said Horanyi. The right conditions cause them to gain an extra electron, allowing them to leap en masse from the surface of ring debris for brief periods, collectively forming the giant spokes that appear dark against the lit side of the rings and bright against the unlit side of the rings.

The researchers hypothesize that the conditions for the spokes to form are correlated to a decrease in the angle of the ring plane to the sun. "Because the rings are more open to the sun now than when Voyager flew by, the charging environment above the rings has prevented the formation of the spokes until very recently," the researchers wrote in Science.

Cassini first imaged a "puny version" of Saturn's spoke rings from a distance of 98,000 miles in early September that were only about 2,200 miles in length and about 60 miles wide, said Horanyi. The team believes the spoke sighting may have been an "early bird" event.

As the ring plane angle decreases when Saturn is near its two seasonal equinoxes, the conditions appear to become more suitable for the formation of the eerie spokes, said Horanyi. Although Cassini currently is orbiting too close to the ring plane to make observations, the researchers expect the spoke activity to have returned by the time the spacecraft increases its inclination in July 2006.

Once the spokes are visible again, the research team believes there will be spoke activity for about eight years, based on the fact that it takes Saturn about 30 Earth-years to complete one orbit around the sun, said Horanyi. The eight-year period should be followed by about six-to-seven years of a spoke hiatus, he said.

The dust grains levitated by plasma during spoke-forming periods are probably hovering less than 50 miles above the rings themselves and they scatter light from the sun differently than do the rings themselves, he said.

But there are still many questions about the spokes, said Horanyi. "We don't know if they form by rapidly expanding, or if they form all at once," he said. During the Voyager mission, they were absent during one observation, but fully developed in a follow-up observation made just five minutes later, Horanyi said.

aboard space shuttle Atlantis' space station construction mission. Making his second flight in space, MacLean will perform a spacewalk during STS-115 to activate the new solar array truss attached to the station. MacLean talks about his life, the rewards of spaceflight and details of STS-115 during this pre-flight interview.

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stunning images of Enceladus taken by Cassini and animation of geysers seen erupting from the moon.

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MRO's orbit insertion explained

The make-or-break engine firing by the Mars Reconnaissance Orbiter to enter orbit around Mars and the subsequent aerobraking to reach the low-altitude perch for science observations are explained by project manager Jim Graf in this narrated animation package.



■ [Play video](#)

MRO overview briefing

Fuk Li, Mars program manager at JPL, Jim Graf, MRO project manager, Rich Zurek, MRO project scientist, and Dan McCleese, the principal investigator for the Mars Climate Sounder instrument, provide an overview on the Mars Reconnaissance Orbiter on March 8, about 48 hours before arrival at Mars.



■ [Play video:](#)

"This is a weird phenomena; we don't have the full story on it yet," he said.

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STS-121 patch

The official crew patch for the STS-121



space shuttle mission, launched in July, depicts Discovery docked to the International Space Station and the gold astronaut emblem emblazoned behind.

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STS-9: Spacelab opens

Spacelab was an orbiting laboratory tucked in the payload bay of the space shuttle for scientists to conduct a range of experiments. The joint European/NASA program flew multiple times aboard shuttle missions starting with STS-9 in November 1983. In this post-flight film presentation, the astronauts from that Columbia mission narrate the highlights from Spacelab-1.



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