Is Pluto a planet or just a small ice cube in the sky?

Look, it's a planet! It's two planets! It's not a planet at all, but an ice dwarf!

Astronomers don't quite know what to call Pluto.

We know Pluto as the ninth planet from the sun. It is the smallest official planet in our solar system. Pluto is only about half as wide as the United States.

But Pluto is different from the other planets in more ways than its small size.

Pluto's moon, Charon, is about half as big as Pluto itself.

Compared with its planet, though, this moon is big. Some astronomers say Pluto and Charon are really a double-planet system.

Another strange thing about Pluto is its path around the sun. Most of the planets have orbits that are nearly a perfect circle. Pluto's orbit is more like a long oval.

What's more, its orbit is tipped at a big angle from the orbits of the other planets.

Astronomers would like to know more about Pluto, Charon and their distant neighborhood of the solar system.

This region is called the Kuiper Belt. Other large, icy objects similar to Pluto and Charon are there, along with a lot of comets.

NASA is planning a mission to Pluto and the Kuiper Belt. This mission is called New Horizons.

The mission was approved by NASA in 2003. The spacecraft is planned to launch in January 2006 and arrive at Pluto in 2015.