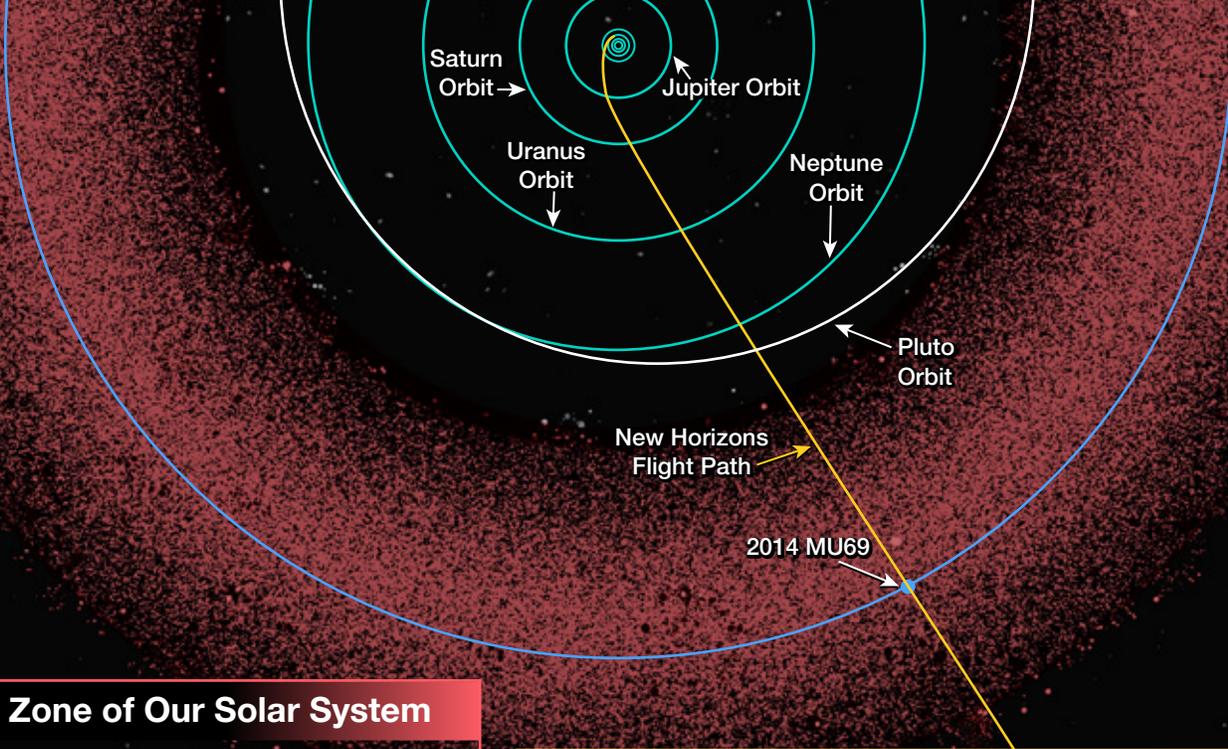


The Kuiper Belt



Third Zone of Our Solar System

Our solar system has three zones: the inner zone of terrestrial planets; middle zone of gas giants; and a third zone called the Kuiper Belt.

This third zone was suggested by Gerard Kuiper in the 1950s and verified when the first smaller object, orbiting in this area with Pluto, was discovered in 1992. The largest of the three zones, the Kuiper Belt extends from three to seven billion miles from the Sun.

This vast region includes New Horizons' next target, an object nicknamed Ultima Thule (pronounced "Ultima Toolee," a Latin term meaning "beyond the known world"), as well as many dwarf planets, billions of comets, and hundreds of thousands of objects sized between them.

New Horizons Kuiper Belt Extended Mission

New Horizons is the first spacecraft to explore the solar system's third zone.

The spacecraft's cameras are imaging objects both close up and in the distance from its unique vantage point surveying the Kuiper Belt. New Horizons is also studying the heliospheric environment with its plasma, ultraviolet, and dust instruments.

New Horizons' prime target for its exploration of the third zone, Ultima Thule, is officially called 2014 MU69. On January 1, 2019, New Horizons plans to fly more than three times closer to Ultima Thule than it did to Pluto.



The Flyby Target: Ultima Thule

Ultima Thule is an ancient, "cold classical Kuiper Belt Object" that likely formed roughly where it is today, and has always been in this far away, cold, and unaltered location.

Little is known about Ultima, which scientists discovered in 2014 using the Hubble Space Telescope. It is reddish in color and about 20 miles across. New Horizons will map it; examine its composition; and look for any satellites, rings, or atmosphere it may have.

Ultima Thule is thought to represent one of the solar system's primordial building blocks. Objects like it may have combined to form larger bodies, like Pluto and other small planets in the Kuiper Belt.

