

Mars Reconnaissance Orbiter blasts off

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NASA's Mars Reconnaissance Orbiter (MRO) successfully lifted off from Cape Canaveral Air Force Station, Fla. The spacecraft launched from Space Launch Complex 41 aboard NASA's first Atlas V rocket.

The spacecraft now begins its journey to Mars. The MRO's 'cruise phase' to the planet takes 7 months, followed by 6 months spent refining its orbit using a technique known as 'aerobraking'. During the initial cruise phase, controllers plan to test the satellite's instruments and begin preparations to slow it using the atmosphere of Mars.

The Mars Reconnaissance Orbiter's mission is to see if long-standing

bodies of water ever existed on the planet. While missions like the Mars Exploration Rovers have shown that water once flowed across the planet's surface, scientists are yet to determine if it was around long enough to provide a habitat for life.

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