

Nature is 'always more crazy than we are'

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Astronomers say more than a thousand planets might be lurking in our galactic neighborhood. That's the conclusion they reached in explaining the genesis of a giant planet discovered in July by Maciej Konacki, then at the California Institute of Technology in Pasadena.

The planet was found inside a triple-star system called HD 188753, about 150 light-years from Earth. The alien world defied explanation because planets such as it should not be able to form a triple-star system.

Now Simon Portegies Zwart of the University of Amsterdam in the Netherlands and Steve McMillan of Drexel University in Philadelphia, believe they've solved the riddle. They say HD 188753 probably formed inside an "open cluster" of several hundred stars.

They argue it is possible the planet first formed around the host star and then the star drew it into a tight orbit. Subsequently, a close encounter in the cluster hooked them up with the binary system.

"Nature is always more crazy than we are; it invents things that we cannot envision at all," says Zwart. "I'm sure we will find more of these systems in the next few years."

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