Small telescope may speed star search

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Astronomers have discovered a planet orbiting a very young star nearly 100 light years away using a relatively small, publicly accessible telescope.

The feat suggests astronomers have found a way to accelerate dramatically the pace of the hunt for planets outside our solar system, researchers said.

The astronomers used the Exoplanet Tracker on the special 0.9-meter Coude feed system within the National Science Foundation's 2.1-meter telescope at Kitt Peak National Observatory near Tucson, Ariz.

The new planet is the most distant ever found using the Doppler technique with a telescope mirror less than 1 meter in size. There are hundreds of such telescopes worldwide, compared with just a handful of the larger telescopes more commonly used in planet finding, researchers said.

"These smaller telescopes are relatively cheap and relatively available," University of Florida astronomer Jian Ge said, "so you can often get access to many dozens of nights on them if you have a promising proposal."

Ge and colleagues from the University of Florida, Tennessee State University, the Institute of Astrophysics in Spain's Canary Islands, Pennsylvania State University and the University of Texas presented their findings Wednesday at the American Astronomical Society's

annual meeting in Washington.