

Fourth orbiter to arrive at Mars on Friday

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NASA's Mars Reconnaissance Orbiter is approaching Mars and, if maneuvers go well, will join three other Earth spacecraft in orbit around the planet.

About 4:25 p.m. EST Friday the \$720 million spacecraft will reduce its speed by 2,200 mph, and begin to orbit Mars, The Washington Post reported Monday.

If all goes well -- 21 Mars missions have ended in disaster -- after six months of course and speed corrections, it will settle into a "science orbit" between 199 and 158 miles above the Martian surface, joining

three currently operating satellites -- two from NASA and one from the European Space Agency, the Post said.

There it will remain for two years, using inspecting the planet. After that time it will be sent into a higher orbit to become a communications relay satellite.

The Mars Reconnaissance Orbiter has been operating flawlessly since its launch in August. "But we are getting into the dangerous portion of the mission," says Jim Graf of NASA's Jet Propulsion Laboratory in Pasadena, Calif. "A lot can go wrong, and if we don't succeed, we will fly right by the planet."

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