

# Alaska researcher changes asteroid orbit

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An astrophysicist at the University of Alaska uncovered the information that narrowed the odds of an asteroid hitting Mars.

Andrew Puckett, who is doing post-doctoral research in Anchorage, found archival NASA data while using the Christmas break as a working vacation, the Anchorage Daily News reported. After he supplied the information to NASA, agency scientists increased the possibility of "Asteroid 2007 WD5" striking Mars from one in 75 to one in 28.

Puckett said he knew the data would change the asteroid's projected orbit.

"I was sure I would also change the impact odds, but I had no idea whether it would go up or down," he said. "So the fact that it went up --

and became a big story -- is just really exciting for me."

If the asteroid hits Mars, the impact will have the effect of a 3-megaton nuclear blast, creating a crater with a diameter of half a mile. Travis Rector, the professor who supervises Puckett, said exploring the crater with remote vehicles would allow scientists to examine whether life has ever existed on Mars.

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