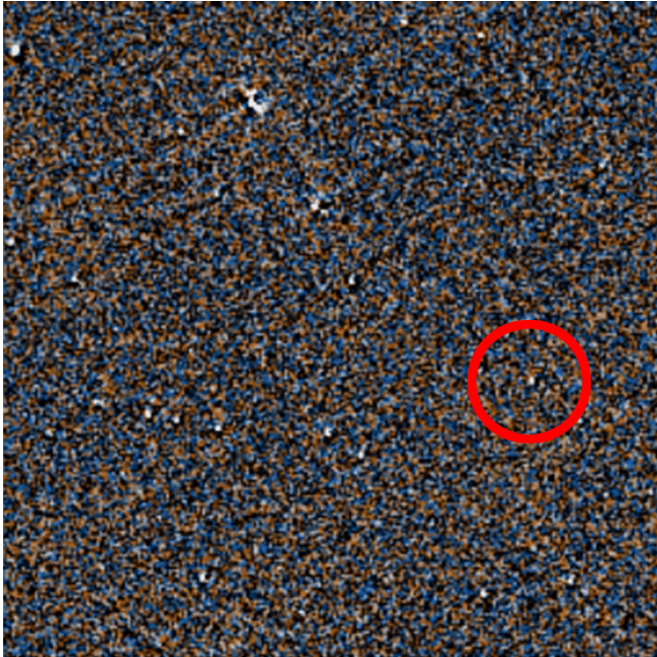


# Citizen scientists uncover a cold new world near sun

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This gif shows the 'flipbook' from which citizen scientists identified the new brown dwarf, marked with the red circle. Credit: NASA

A new citizen-science tool released earlier this year to help astronomers pinpoint new worlds lurking in the outer reaches of our solar system has already led to a discovery: a brown dwarf a little more than 100 light years away from the Sun. Just six days after the launch of the Backyard Worlds: Planet 9 website in February, four different users alerted the science team to the curious object, whose presence has since been confirmed via an infrared telescope. Details were recently published in the *Astrophysical Journal Letters*.

"I was so proud of our volunteers as I saw the data on this new cold world coming in," said Jackie Faherty, a senior scientist in the American Museum of Natural History's Department of Astrophysics and one of Backyard World's

researchers. "It was a feel-good moment for [science](#)."

The Backyard Worlds project lets anyone with a computer and an internet connection flip through images taken by NASA's Wide Field Infrared Survey Explorer (WISE) spacecraft. If an object is close enough to Earth, it will appear to "jump" when multiple images taken of the same spot in the sky a few years apart are compared. The goal for Backyard Worlds volunteers—of which there are more than 37,000—is to flag the moving objects they see in these digital flipbooks for further investigation by the science team. So far, volunteers have classified more than 4 million flipbooks.

Days after the Backyard Worlds website debuted on February 15, Bob Fletcher, a science teacher in Tasmania, identified a very faint object moving across the WISE images. It was soon also flagged by three other citizen scientists from Russia, Serbia, and the United States. After some initial investigation by the research team, which originally called the object "Bob's dwarf," Faherty was awarded time on NASA's Infrared Telescope Facility in Hawaii, where she confirmed that it was a previously unknown brown dwarf just a few hundred degrees warmer than Jupiter. The authors say that sky surveys had missed this [object](#) because it's too faint. All four volunteers are co-authors on the scientific paper announcing the discovery.

Brown dwarfs, sometimes called "failed stars," are spread throughout the Milky Way. They lack enough mass to sustain nuclear fusion but they are hot enough to glow in the infrared range of the light spectrum.

"Brown dwarfs are strikingly similar to Jupiter so we study their atmospheres in order to look at what weather on other worlds might look like," said Jonathan Gagné, a Backyard Worlds team member

from the Carnegie Institution for Science.

Although the Backyard Worlds research team hopes to find the infamous Planet 9 hiding in our own solar system, these brown dwarfs are also exciting discoveries.

"It's possible that there is a cold world closer than what we believe to be the closest star to the Sun," Faherty said. "Given enough time, I think our volunteers are going help to complete the map of our solar neighborhood."

**More information:** Marc J. Kuchner et al, The First Brown Dwarf Discovered by the Backyard Worlds: Planet 9 Citizen Science Project, *The Astrophysical Journal* (2017). [DOI: 10.3847/2041-8213/aa7200](https://doi.org/10.3847/2041-8213/aa7200)

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