

NASA probe finds second mountain range in Pluto's 'heart'

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Washington: The New Horizons probe has found a second mountain range situated between bright, icy plains and dark, heavily-cratered terrain on the lower-left edge of Pluto.

The new, less lofty mountain range lies near the bright, heart-shaped southwestern margin of Pluto's Tombaugh Regio (Tombaugh Region).

The newly-discovered frozen peaks are estimated to be one-1.5 kms high, about the same height as the US' Appalachian Mountains.

The new range is just west of the region within Pluto's heart called Sputnik Planum (Sputnik Plain). The peaks lie some 110 kms northwest of Norgay Montes (icy Norgay Mountains) discovered first by New Horizons on July 15.

This newest image further illustrates the remarkably well-defined topography along the western edge of Tombaugh Regio.

"There is a pronounced difference in texture between the younger, frozen plains to the east and the dark, heavily-cratered terrain to the west," said Jeff Moore, leader of the New Horizons team at NASA's Ames Research Center in Moffett Field, California.

There's a complex interaction going on between the bright and the dark materials that we are still trying to understand, he added in a space agency statement.

While Sputnik Planum is believed to be relatively young in geological terms - perhaps less than 100 million years old - the darker region probably dates back billions of years.

The bright, sediment-like material appears to be filling in old craters (for example, the bright circular feature to the lower left of centre).

This image was acquired by the Long Range Reconnaissance Imager (LORRI) on board New Horizons from a distance of 77,000 kms and sent back to Earth on July 20.

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