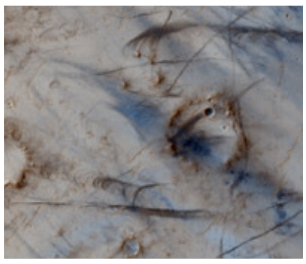
SPACE NEWS

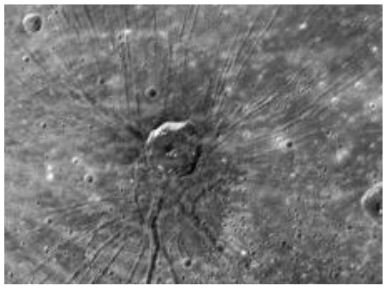
N° 14 4th February 2008

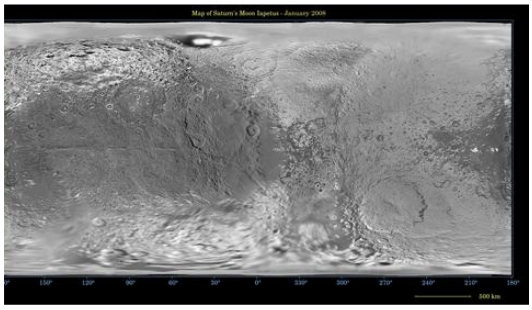
Last week in space



The Martian atmosphere is tenuously thin; just 1% as thick as the Earth's. And yet, it boasts a surprising array of weather systems, including clouds and global dust storms. The winds push dunes across the Martian surface and towering dust devils carve crisscrossed trails across the desolate landscape. Here on Earth, wind, water and the slow movement of tectonic plates reshape the surface of our planet. On Mars, though, there's not a drop of liquid water to be seen, and the planet's plates seized up eons ago. For more information, take a look here: www.nasa.gov/mission_pages/MRO/news/mro-20080123.html

After a journey of more than 2.2 billion miles and three and a half years, NASA's MESSENGER spacecraft made its first flyby of Mercury on January 14, 2008. All seven scientific instruments worked flawlessly, producing a stream of surprises that is amazing and delighting the science team. The 1,213 images conclusively show that the planet is a lot less like the Moon than many previously thought, with features unique to this innermost world. The puzzling magnetosphere appears to be very different from what Mariner 10 discovered and first sampled almost 34 years ago. For more information, take a look here: http://messenger.jhuapl.edu/news_room/status_report_01_30_08.html





This global map of Iapetus was created using images taken during Cassini spacecraft flybys, with Voyager images filling in the poles. The map is an equidistant projection and has a scale of 803 meters (0.5 miles) per pixel. Some territory se en in this map was imaged by Cassini's cameras using reflected light from Saturn. The mean radius of Iapetus used for projection of this map is 736 kilometres (457 miles). For more information, take a look here: http://saturn.jpl.nasa.gov/multimedia/images/image-details.cfm?imageID=2936

Not to be missed next week

As there is no moon this week, why not go out hunting for open star clusters; the following are relatively easy to find: M41 in Canis Major, M37 in the Charioteer, M44 in the Crab, the Perseus double cluster (NGC869 et 864) and, of course M45, the Pleiades – good hunting!!

Monday 4th January. Just before sunrise take a look south-east and admire the triangle made up of Jupiter, Venus and the Moon.

Saturday 9th February: The asteroid 6 Hebe (magnitude 8.9) can be found about half a degree from pi 2 Cancer (a magnitude 5.6 star)