

Remains of a Modern Glacier Found Near Mars' Equator Implies Water Ice Possibly Present at Low Latitudes on Mars Even Today



If there is still water ice preserved at shallow depths at a low latitude on Mars, there would be implications for science and human exploration



Figure 1: A Relict Glacier near Mars' Equator. (NASA MRO HiRISE and CRISM false color composite. Lee et al. 2023).

March 15, 2023, Mountain View, California – In a groundbreaking announcement at the 54th Lunar and Planetary Science Conference held in The Woodlands, Texas, on March 16, 2023, scientists revealed the discovery of a relict glacier near Mars' equator. Located in Eastern Noctis Labyrinthus at coordinates 7° 33' S, 93° 14' W, this finding is significant as it implies the presence of surface water ice on Mars in recent times, even near the equator. This discovery raises the possibility that ice may still exist at shallow depths in the area, which could have significant implications for future human exploration.

The surface feature identified as a "relict glacier" is one of many light-toned deposits (LTDs) found in the region. Typically, LTDs consist mainly of light-colored sulfate salts, but this deposit also shows many of the features of a glacier, including crevasse fields and moraine bands. The glacier is estimated to be 6 kilometers long and up to 4 kilometers wide, with a surface elevation ranging from +1.3 to +1.7 kilometers. This discovery suggests that Mars' recent history may have been more watery than previously thought, which could have implications for understanding the planet's habitability.

"What we've found is not ice, but a salt deposit with the detailed morphologic features of a glacier. What we think happened here is that salt formed on top

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CONTACT

Rebecca McDonald
Director of Communications,
SETI Institute
339 Bernardo Ave, Ste 200
Mountain View, CA 94043
rmcdonald@SETI.org

Dr. Pascal Lee
Planetary Scientist,
SETI Institute & Mars Institute
NASA Ames Research Center
MS 245-3
Moffett Field, CA 94035-1000
pascal.lee@marsinstitute.net

of a glacier while preserving the shape of the ice below, down to details like crevasse fields and moraine bands,” said Dr. Pascal Lee, a planetary scientist with the SETI Institute and the Mars Institute, and the lead author of the [study](#).

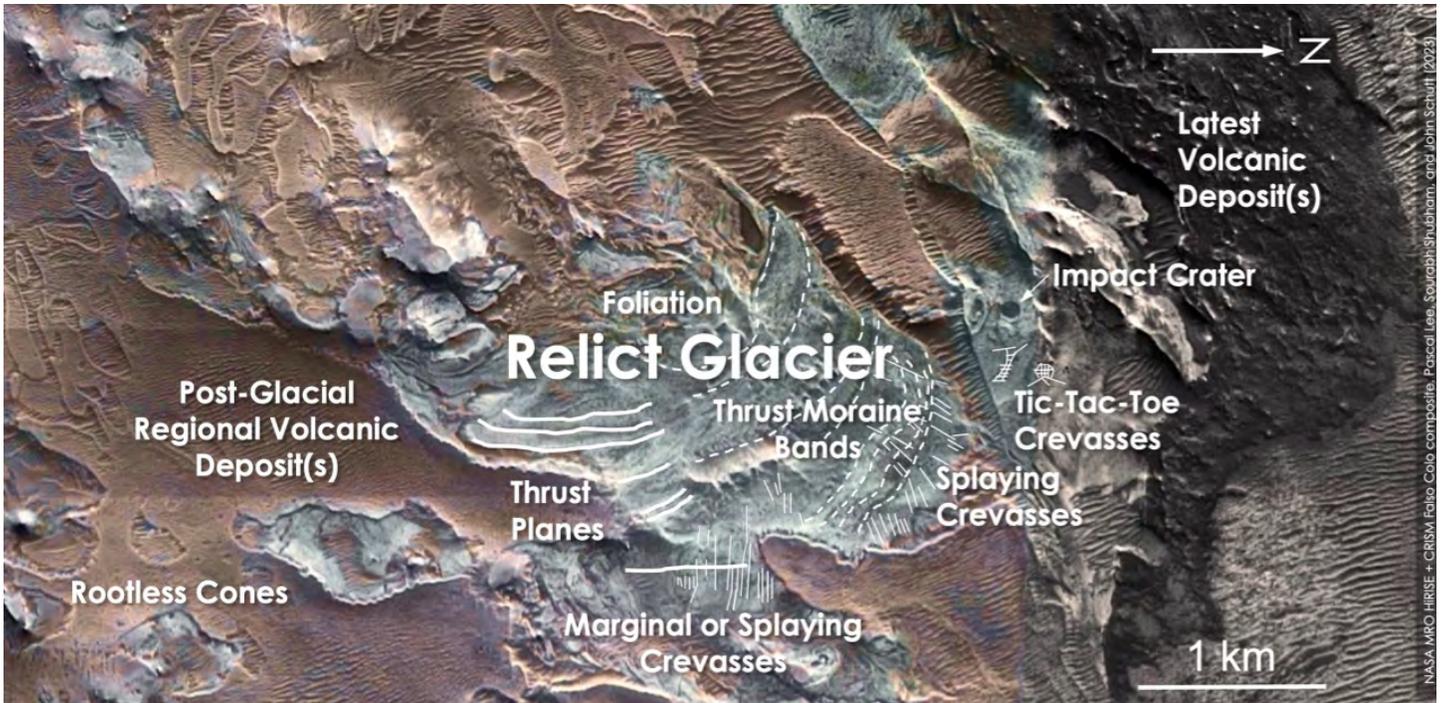


Figure 2: Interpretation of the “Relict Glacier” ’s features. (Lee et al. 2023).

The presence of volcanic materials blanketing the region hints of how the sulfate salts might have formed and preserved a glacier’s imprint underneath. When freshly erupted pyroclastic materials (mixtures of volcanic ash, pumice, and hot lava blocks) come in contact with water ice, sulfate salts like the ones commonly making up Mars’ *light-toned deposits* may form and build up into a hardened, crusty salt layer.

“This region of Mars has a history of volcanic activity. And where some of the volcanic materials came in contact with glacier ice, chemical reactions would have taken place at the boundary between the two to form a hardened layer of sulfate salts,” explains Sourabh Shubham, a graduate student at the University of Maryland’s Department of Geology, and a co-author of the study. “This is the most likely explanation for the hydrated and hydroxylated sulfates we observe in this light-toned deposit.”

Over time, with erosion removing the blanketing volcanic materials, a crusty layer of sulfates mirroring the glacier ice underneath became exposed, which would explain how a salt deposit is now visible, presenting features unique to glaciers such as crevasses and moraine bands.

“Glaciers often present distinctive types of features, including marginal, splaying, and tic-tac-toe crevasse fields, and also thrust moraine bands and foliation. We are seeing analogous features in this light-toned

deposit, in form, location, and scale. It's very intriguing," said John Schutt, a geologist at the Mars Institute, experienced icefield guide in the Arctic and Antarctica, and a co-author of this study.

The glacier's fine-scale features, its associated sulfate salts deposit, and the overlying volcanic materials are all very sparsely cratered by impacts and must be geologically young, likely Amazonian in age, the latest geologic period which includes modern Mars. "We've known about glacial activity on Mars at many locations, including near the equator in the more distant past. And we've known about recent glacial activity on Mars, but so far, only at higher latitudes. A relatively young relict glacier in this location tells us that Mars experienced surface ice in recent times, even near the equator, which is new," said Lee.

It remains to be seen whether water ice might still be preserved underneath the light-toned deposit or if it has disappeared entirely. "Water ice is, at present, not stable at the very surface of Mars near the equator at these elevations. So, it's not surprising that we're not detecting any water ice at the surface. It is possible that all the glacier's water ice has sublimated away by now. But there's also a chance that some of it might still be protected at shallow depth under the sulfate salts."

The study draws an analogy with the ancient *ice islands* on salt lakebeds, or *salars*, of the Altiplano in South America. There, old glacier ice has remained protected from melting, evaporation, and sublimation underneath blankets of bright salts. Lee and his co-authors hypothesize a similar situation to explain how sulfate salts on Mars might be able to offer protection to otherwise sublimation-vulnerable ice at low latitudes on the planet.

If there is still water ice preserved at shallow depths at a low latitude on Mars, there would be implications for science and human exploration. "The desire to land humans at a location where they might be able to extract water ice from the ground has been pushing mission planners to consider higher latitude sites. But the latter environments are typically colder and more challenging for humans and robots. If there were equatorial locations where ice might be found at shallow depth, then we'd have the best of both environments: warmer conditions for human exploration and still access to ice," said Lee.

But Lee cautions that more work still needs to be done: "We now have to determine if, and how much, water ice might actually be present in this relict glacier, and whether other light-toned deposits might also have, or have had, ice-rich substrates."

About the SETI Institute

Founded in 1984, the SETI Institute is a non-profit, multidisciplinary research and education organization whose mission is to lead humanity's quest to understand the origins and prevalence of life and intelligence in the universe and share that knowledge with the world. Research at the SETI Institute encompasses the physical and biological sciences and leverages expertise in data analytics, machine learning and advanced signal detection technologies. The SETI Institute is a distinguished research partner for industry, academia and government agencies, including NASA and NSF.

About Mars Institute

The Mars Institute is a non-profit research organization dedicated to the advancement of Mars science, exploration, and the public understanding of Mars. Research at the Mars Institute focuses Mars and other planetary destinations that may serve as stepping-stones to Mars, in particular Mars' moons, our Moon, and near-Earth objects. The Mars Institute investigates the technologies and strategies that will enable and optimize the future human exploration of Mars. The Mars Institute operates the Haughton-Mars Project Research Station on Devon Island, High Arctic.