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NASA Sends Orbiter To Map Moon's Surface

-- NASA, the U.S. space agency, is hoping to send a manned mission to the moon by the year 2020, and preparations have already started in a serious way.

After blasting off Thursday, a new lunar spacecraft should reach the moon this morning and start photographing and mapping the surface of the moon from its orbit 30 miles up. The Lunar Reconnaissance Orbiter (LRO for short) will greatly improve the data scientists have about the moon's surface and will help identify areas for possible human exploration. The atlas of the moon's surface created by this mission will be *much* more complete than any mapping ever done of the moon. In fact, the surface of Mars has been mapped more thoroughly than that of the moon, and Mars is much farther away!

While in orbit, the LRO will also take pictures of the spacecraft left behind during previous missions to the moon, such as the moon rovers, which have been sitting there unused for nearly 40 years. Another unmanned space probe will be sent to the moon in October and will deliberately crash into the surface to create a plume of dust that will be studied by the Hubble Space Telescope.

The last time an astronaut walked on the surface of the moon was in 1972. Now that much better technology is available, scientists want to return to the moon to do new tests and research.

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