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EDITORIAL

The Human Moon

Published: November 16, 2009

Over the past four months, NASA's Lunar Reconnaissance Orbiter spacecraft, which is in a low polar orbit over the Moon, has returned a series of images of Apollo landing sites showing the vessels themselves at rest on the Moon's surface.

The most recent of these, released last week, is a high-resolution [view of the first manned landing site](#) where Apollo 11 touched down on July 20, 1969. On the right are the bright, stony rays of West Crater, and at the left edge of the photograph is the lower stage of the lunar module itself, gleaming like a pinpoint of light on the gray, cratered plain.

The mission of the Lunar Reconnaissance Orbiter, which is loaded with instruments, is to produce a new and vastly sharper glimpse of the Moon from an orbit about 30 miles above the surface — all with an eye toward a possible manned return.

Yet there's something terribly wistful about these photographs of the Apollo landing sites. The detail is such that if Neil Armstrong were walking there now, we could make him out, make out his footsteps even, like the astronaut footpath clearly visible in the photos of the Apollo 14 site.

Perhaps the wistfulness is caused by the sense of simple grandeur in those Apollo missions. Perhaps, too, it's a reminder of the risk we all felt after the Eagle had landed — the possibility that it might be unable to lift off again and the astronauts would be stranded on the Moon. But it may also be that a photograph like this one is as close as we're able to come to looking directly back into the human past.

There the lunar module sits, parked just where it landed 40 years ago, as if it still really were 40 years ago and all the time since merely imaginary.

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