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For special needs, please contact us three days prior to the event at 845-1515.

NASA: Mars once had a shallow pool of briny water on its surface

By Andrew Bridges
THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

PASADENA, Calif. — Mars had a shallow pool of briny water on its surface long ago, NASA said Tuesday in announcing what could be the strongest evidence yet that the now-dry Red Planet was once hospitable to life.

The space agency's scientists announced earlier this month that the Opportunity rover found evidence of water in Mars' distant past. But it was unclear whether the water was in the soil or on the surface. The new findings suggest there was a pool of saltwater at least two inches deep.

A rocky outcropping examined by the rover had ripple patterns and concentrations of salt — considered telltale signs that the rock formed in standing water.

"We think Opportunity is now parked on what was once the shoreline of a salty sea on Mars," said Cornell University astronomer Steve Squyres, the mission's main scientist.

The findings add to the growing body of evidence that the Red Planet was once a wetter and possibly warmer place that may have been conducive to life.

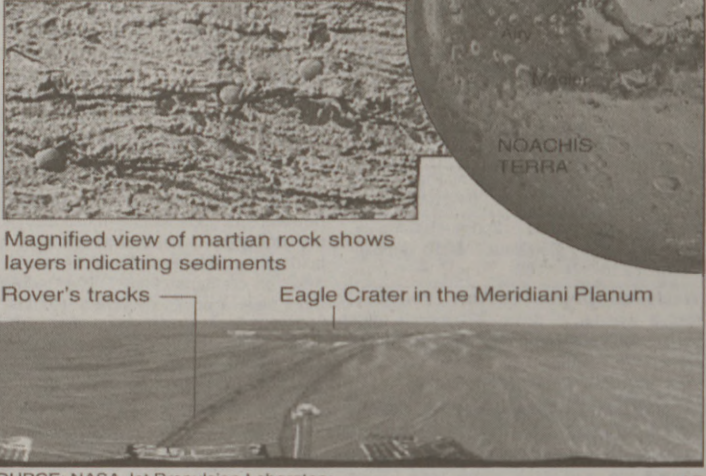
"This is a profound discovery, it has profound implications for astrobiology, and I'd like to say if you have an interest in searching for fossils on Mars, this is the first place you'd want to go," said Ed Weiler, NASA's associate administrator for space science.

Although Squyres referred to the water as a sea, scientists said it is not clear how big the body of water might have been or whether it was a fixed feature and not just a desert basin that flooded periodically.

Evidence of Mars' surface brine

NASA's Mars Opportunity rover has found rocks thought to be sedimentary deposits that formed where saltwater once flowed.

NASA's Opportunity rover is located in the Meridiani Planum region



SOURCE: NASA Jet Propulsion Laboratory

The evidence also does not indicate when water covered the broad and flat region where Opportunity landed, called Meridiani Planum, or for how long. Nor does it indicate if any microbes ever existed there and, ultimately, whether people can live there, Weiler said.

NASA plans to send a more sophisticated rover to Mars in 2009 to probe for signs of life. In 2013, the space agency plans to send a robotic mission that would collect rock and soil samples and bring them back to Earth for more detailed analysis.

NASA intends to send one or more unmanned missions to Mars every 26 months. President Bush recently proposed a manned mission to visit the planet but did not set a timeline for such an undertaking, which probably remains decades away.

The findings were presented at a televised news conference at the headquarters of the National Aeronautics and Space Administration in Washington.

Weiler noted that a group of outside scientists was brought in to review the rover mission scientists' findings before they were announced.

The findings give NASA impetus to expand its Mars exploration program to learn whether microbes ever existed there and, ultimately, whether people can live there, Weiler said.

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AAA reports record-high gasoline prices

By Brad Foss
THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

WASHINGTON — The retail price of gasoline hit an all-time high Tuesday — nearly \$1.74 per gallon nationwide — reflecting strong demand, tight supplies and the high cost of oil, AAA reported.

AAA, formerly the American Automobile Association, reported that motorists are now paying \$1.738 per gallon for self-serve regular unleaded gasoline, one-tenth of a penny higher than the previous record set Aug. 30 of last year. Premium unleaded costs more than \$2 a gallon in many parts of the country.

"Unstable gasoline prices make budgeting for fuel costs extremely difficult for families and businesses," AAA said in a statement.

The Orlando, Fla.-based travel agency gets its data from Oil Price Information Service of Lakewood, N.J., which collects retail price information from 60,000 locations daily.

Gasoline prices traditionally rise between March and May as refiners temporarily shut down their plants in preparation for the peak summer driving season, when special clean-burning blends of fuel are required. These shutdowns shrink supplies.

This year, the effect on price has been magnified because commercial inventories of gasoline are already low. For the week ended March 12, U.S. gasoline inventories stood at 199.6 million barrels, down from 202.1 million barrels a year ago.

The most recent statistics from the Energy Department show that gasoline demand has been roughly 4.5 percent higher than last year over the past four weeks, at 8.9 million barrels a day. Moreover, refiners are maintaining extremely lean inventories because of the high price of crude oil, another factor contributing to higher fuel prices.

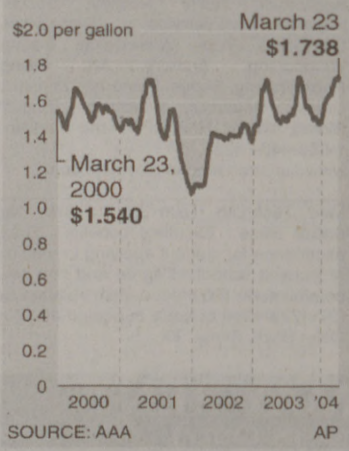
Crude oil for May delivery sold for \$37.45 per barrel Tuesday on the New York Mercantile Exchange, up 40 cents. The price of oil is below recent highs but still near its highest level in 14 years.

The Energy Department's weekly survey of retail gasoline prices, released Monday, showed a jump to \$1.743 in the national average for regular grade gasoline in the week ended March 22, up from \$1.724 the week before. That's still 0.4 cent below the record the agency reported last August.

Gas prices reach all-time high

The national average price of self-serve regular unleaded gasoline reached an all-time high on Tuesday, reflecting strong demand, tight supplies and the high cost of oil.

National daily average price of regular unleaded gasoline



The department's Energy Information Administration compiles the data weekly from a sampling of about 800 locations from a database of 115,000 stations monitored.

Meantime, some Democratic lawmakers criticized the Bush administration for contributing to

NEWS IN BRIEF

Republican vote drive to hit MTV

WASHINGTON (AP) — For young Americans, care more about GOP than the GOP, choosing their favorite music video on MTV's "Total Request Live" may be as close they've come to the Democratic process.

Republicans are hoping change that by sending voter registration Thursday to two places where Republicans are ally in short supply: MTV's Times Square.

The National Republican Committee's Reggie Registration Rig is scheduled to visit the "TRL" studio, where the current test between President Bush and Massachusetts Sen. John Kerry usually takes a back seat to playing videos of Usher and Clay Aiken.

9 police trained shot south of Baghdad

BAGHDAD, Iraq (AP) — Gunmen opened fire on a van filled with police recruits south of Baghdad Tuesday, killing nine, as assailants shot and killed two policemen — twin brothers — north of the capital.

The slayings were the latest to target police and other Iraqis who work with the U.S.-led occupation.

The attack in the south took place on a road between Musayeb and Hillah when a car pulled in front of the minibus as assailants sprayed it with small arms fire, police Hillah said.

the recent run-up in fuel costs purchasing oil for the Strategic Petroleum Reserve at a time when supplies are tight, driving prices even higher.

Sen. Carl Levin, D-Mich., questioned the diversion at a time when private oil inventories, at 281 million barrels, 23.4 million barrels below the five-year average for this time year, according to the EIA.

"When supply goes down, the private inventory the price going to go up," argued Levin, said high energy prices have "a drag on the economy" and pose national security concerns.

Sens. Charles Schumer, New York, Barbara Boxer, California and Harry Reid, Nevada also urged the Bush administration release oil from the reserve, which is close to its 700 million-barrel capacity at 648 million barrels as of March 12.

Energy Secretary Spencer Abraham has repeatedly urged the administration views the petroleum reserve as an emergency stockpile for national security and that it should be used to manipulate prices.


The amount of oil taken off the market "is far negligible" in a global oil market of 86 million barrels a day, Abraham said Tuesday at a Senate hearing.

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LeaderShape is an intensive and energizing six-day student program at Camp Allen that teaches key leadership issues — vision, partnership, integrity, results, reflection, and personal growth.

This program is **FREE**, but space is limited so apply today!

The deadline to submit applications has been extended to Friday, March 26, 2004 @ 5:00 pm

Applications can be found at the front area of Student Activities or online at <http://studentactivities.tamu.edu/stuactweb/sitemap.htm> (on Leadership Opportunities). Return applications to Koldus 142.

An informational meeting is being held on Wednesday, March 24th @ 8:30 pm in Koldus Room 144 for anyone interested in applying.