

Summary Information Sheet

Comets

A comet's nucleus is a "dirty snowball" consisting of frozen gases (ices) and dust. Orbital periods range from about 3 years to millions of years and some comets move in highly inclined orbits. Close to the Sun, ices evaporate and dust grains are released from the nucleus, forming a "coma" (the comet's head) and one or more tails. Some comets become very bright and have spectacular tails.



The Bayeux Tapestry with Comet Halley (1066)

The gas jet carries dust particles along

Dust grains: organic compounds and silicates

Frozen gases (ices): mainly water, carbon monoxide, carbon dioxide

Internal structure is loose and fluffy – some comets break up

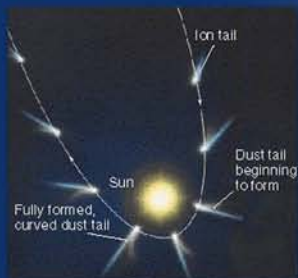
Comets carry material dating from the formation of the Solar System

Dust tail up to 100 mio km long or more

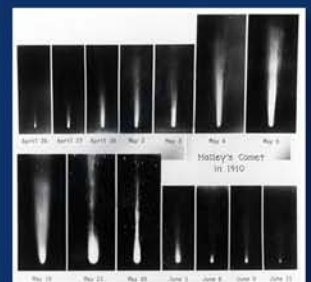


Sunlit side
Surrounding "coma" of gas and dust up to several mio km diameter. Gases glow and dust grains reflect sunlight

Very dark surface layer reflects only 3-4% of incoming sunlight



Orbit and evolution of a comet



Comet tail evolution (Halley 1910)



Tails of comet Hale-Bopp (1998)



Comet Halley's nucleus (ESA Giotto, 1986)



Comet Borrelly (NASA Deep Space 1, 2001)



Broken-up comet SL-9 hits Jupiter (1994)

Physical Data

Property
Distance from the Sun
Orbital period
Dimensions
Mass
Density

Comet Halley
88-5300 mio km
76 years
Nucleus: 16 x 8 x 7 km
8×10^{13} kg
100 kg/m ³

For comparison

Asteroid Gaspra
332 mio km
3.29 years
19 x 12 x 11 km
?
?

Mars moon Deimos
-
1.26 days
15 x 12 x 11 km
1.8×10^{15} kg
1700 kg/m ³

Images from ESO, ESA or NASA except otherwise stated

Concept: Bernhard Mackowiak