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Red Planet recon

By GARY ROBBINS
The Orange County Register

Interactive graphic

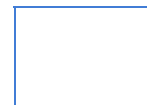
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Picture a hot-air balloon drifting over a majestic landscape, and you'll get an idea of how scientists might someday figure out when and where water existed on Mars and whether there's any left just beneath the planet's surface.



In a journal article to be published next month, scientists propose using balloons and blimps to gain a different perspective of Mars' vaulting hills, scrubby plains and deep, wide canyons.

"The robots there now see the little picture. The satellites see the big picture. What we need is something in between, like low-flying balloons that give us a missing vantage point," said Wolfgang Fink, a physicist at Caltech in Pasadena who co-wrote a paper on the idea for the Journal of

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"Balloons can enter places the rovers just cannot reach and that the satellites can't see well. They'd be good scouts."

Fink drafted the plan with University of Arizona planetary geologist James Dohm, who says a balloon could "read the geologic history of Mars" as it descended into canyons such as Valles Marineris with high-resolution cameras.

"It'd be just like reading the stratigraphy of our Grand Canyon," said Dohm, who also envisions dropping coin-sized sensors from the balloons to study the winds and gases in Mars' thin atmosphere.

NASA has no plans to fund such missions. But it does have a balloon research program that has sent balloons high into the atmosphere to study much of the Earth. And the space agency is constantly looking for novel ways to examine such questions as: Why do dark streaks keep appearing in the slopes of Mars? Are the streaks caused by salty liquid? Or are they dust avalanches?

"Exploring by balloon has risks," Fink said. "We'd have to deal with winds and sand. But the scientific payoff could be extraordinary."

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