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SPACE

# RARE GREEN COMET SEEN RACING THROUGH THE SKY FOR THE FIRST TIME IN MORE THAN 50,000 YEARS

The comet, C/2022 E3 (ZTF), last passed by when Neanderthals walked the Earth

**A**nyone looking to the stars in early February may have been treated to a rare sight. The luminous green comet C/2022 E3 (ZTF) could be seen making its way across the night sky as it made a close flyby of Earth. While some comets are reasonably regular visitors – Halley’s Comet, for example, comes past us every 75 to 79 years – C/2022 E3 (ZTF) only makes the trip once every 50,000 years.

During its closest approach on 1 February, the comet came within around 40 million kilometres of Earth. It could be seen near to the north celestial pole (a location that appears directly overhead to viewers in the North Pole) before gradually fading out of view over the next few days.

It was first discovered by astronomers based at the Zwicky Transient Facility at the Palomar Observatory in California last year. It is thought to have originated in the Oort Cloud, a roughly spherical cloud of small, icy bodies located in the far reaches of the Solar System.

Comets are large objects made of dust and ice that travel around the Sun in orbits ranging from 3.3 years to more than one million years. They are ancient bodies left over from the formation of the Solar System some 4.6 billion years ago.

Their distinctive tails are created by gas bursting out of their centres and trailing behind them as they are heated by the Sun.

C/2022 E3 (ZTF)’s ghostly hue is due to it containing a high proportion of diatomic carbon, a green, gaseous chemical consisting of molecules made up of two carbon atoms.

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