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**The Loneliest Galaxy In The Universe**

By Ethan Siegel

Our greatest, largest-scale surveys of the universe have given us an unprecedented view of cosmic structure extending for tens of billions of light years. With the combined effects of normal matter, dark matter, dark energy, neutrinos and radiation all affecting how matter clumps, collapses and separates over time, the great cosmic web we see is in tremendous agreement with our best theories: the Big Bang and General Relativity. Yet this understanding was only possible because of the pioneering work of Edwin Hubble, who identified a large number of galaxies outside of our own, correctly measured their distance (following the work of Vesto Slipher's work measuring their redshifts), and discovered the expanding universe.

But what if the Milky Way weren't located in one of the "strands" of the great cosmic web, where galaxies are plentiful and ubiquitous in many different directions? What if, instead, we were located in one of the great "voids" separating the vast majority of galaxies? It would've taken telescopes and imaging technology far more advanced than Hubble had at his disposal to even detect a single galaxy beyond our own, much less dozens, hundreds or millions, like we have today. While the nearest galaxies to us are only a few million light years distant, there are voids so large that a galaxy located at the center of one might not see another for a hundred times that distance.

While we've readily learned about our place in the universe from observing what's around us, not everyone is as fortunate. In particular, the galaxy MCG+01-02-015 has not a single known galaxy around it for a hundred million light years in all directions. Were you to draw a sphere around the Milky Way with a radius of 100 million light years, we'd find hundreds of thousands of galaxies. But not MCG+01-02-015; it's the loneliest galaxy ever discovered. Our Milky Way, like most galaxies, has been built up by mergers and accretions of many other galaxies over billions of years, having acquired stars and gas from a slew of our former neighbors. But an isolated galaxy like this one has only the matter it was born with to call its own.

Edwin Hubble made his universe-changing discovery using telescope technology from 1917, yet he would have found absolutely zero other galaxies at all were we situated at MCG+01-02-015's location. The first visible galaxy wouldn't have shown up until we had 1960s-level technology, and who knows if we'd have continued looking? If we were such a lonely galaxy, would we have given up the search, and concluded that our galaxy encompassed all of existence? Or would we have continued peering deeper into the void,

eventually discovering our unusual location in a vast, expanding universe? For the inhabitants of the loneliest galaxy, we can only hope that they didn't give up the search, and discovered the entire universe.

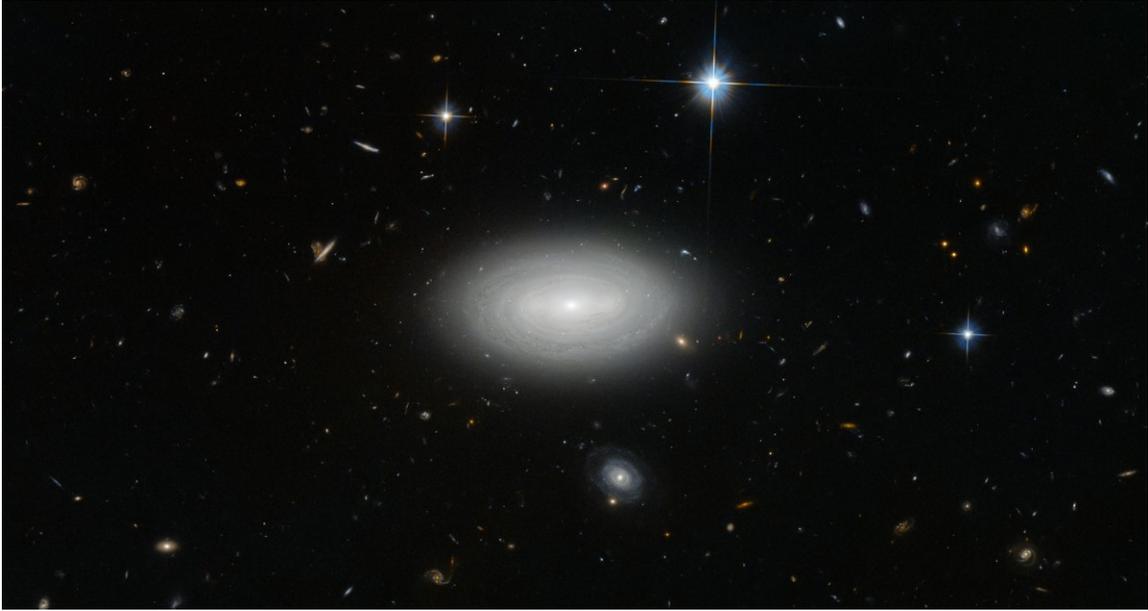


Image credit: ESA/Hubble & NASA and N. Gorin (STScI); Acknowledgement: Judy Schmidt, of the loneliest void galaxy in the known: MCG+01-02-015.