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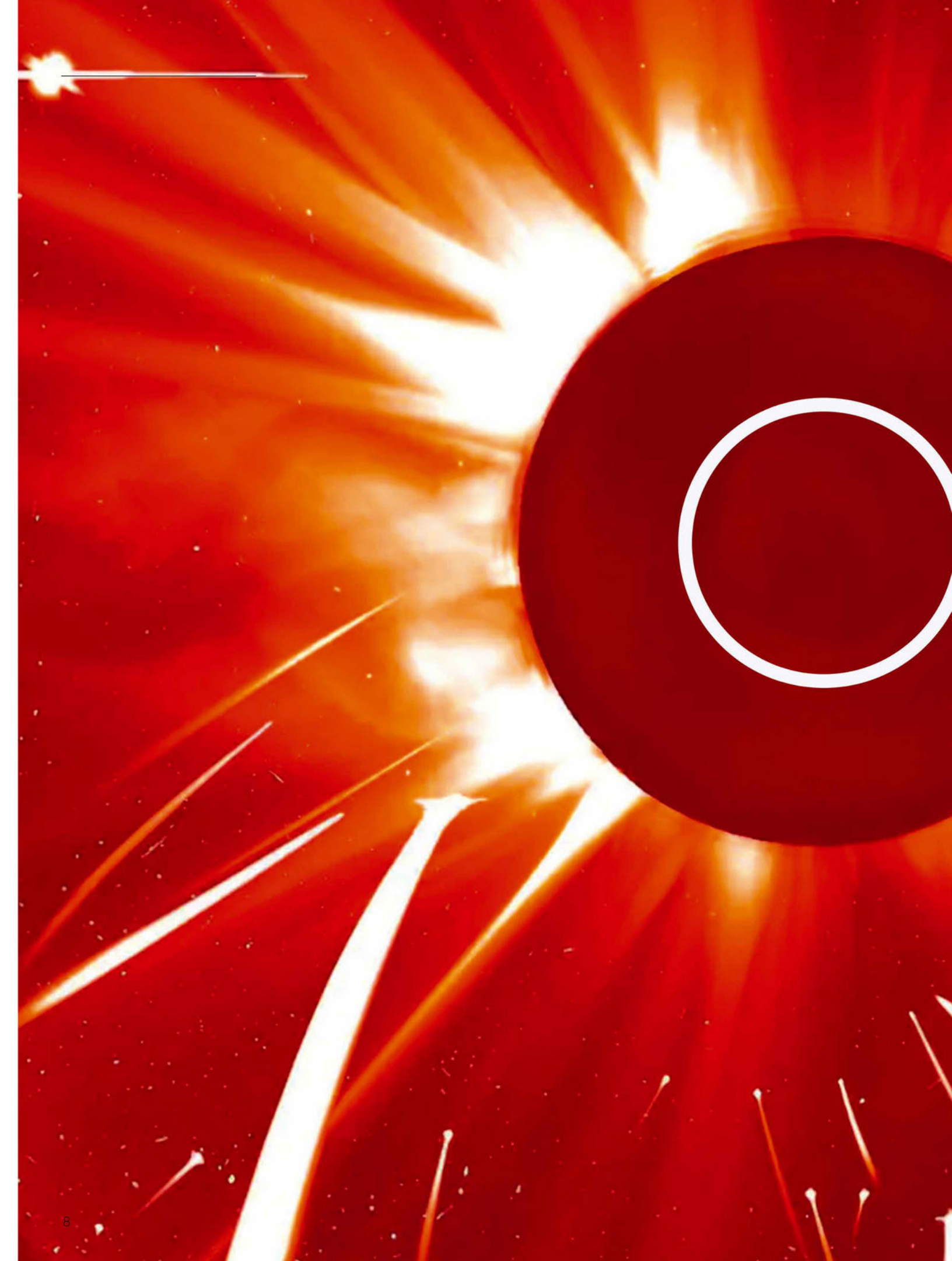
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EYE OPENER

Sunseekers

Who says you need a huge, cutting-edge telescope on top of a mountain to discover a comet? Especially not when you can search for these celestial visitors from the comfort of your sofa. That's exactly what citizen scientists from around the world have done in the Sungrazer Project (sungrazer.nrl.navy.mil) and this stunning composite image is the result. It shows some of the brightest comets ever observed by the Large Angle and Spectrometric Coronagraph (LASCO) on the Solar and Heliospheric Observatory (SOHO), a joint ESA and NASA spacecraft.

Stationed around 1.5 million kilometres away from Earth, SOHO watches the Sun and studies its corona – the star's outer atmosphere. Each of the streaks of light in this image is an icy comet that brightens as it gets closer to the Sun. The dark area in the centre is SOHO's occulting disc, which blocks out the Sun's glare, allowing us to see the fainter features around it.

Over 4,500 comets have been found by the Sungrazer Project, that's over half of all known comets. "SOHO is the most prominent comet-hunter, with a huge catalogue of discoveries still awaiting analysis," says Dr Karl Battams, of the SOHO and Sungrazer Projects.

NASA/ESA/SOHO

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