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MARIA VALDES

Space

A rare find

A large meteorite recovered from Antarctica demonstrates why it is the perfect place to go hunting for space rocks, reports **Alex Wilkins**

RESEARCHERS in Antarctica have found a meteorite weighing in at 7.6 kilograms, making it one of the largest ever seen on the continent.

Antarctica is one of the best places to find meteorites: its dry, cold weather preserves them, while a uniform white background makes them easy to spot and active glaciers churn up any ancient ones buried beneath the ice. In the past hundred years, more than 45,000 have been found there, most of which have been micrometeorites, which range

from tens to hundreds of grams.

Maria Schönbachler at ETH Zurich in Switzerland and her colleagues discovered five new meteorites during an expedition near the Princess Elisabeth Antarctica research station last month. The team combed through satellite imagery using a machine learning model and identified five icy regions that were relatively free of snow, which might have otherwise covered up meteorites. They explored all five regions systematically by snowmobile,

but only one contained any meteorites. “To find such a big one – this is kind of luck to be honest,” says Schönbachler.

While the meteorite has yet to be analysed, it appears to be an ordinary chondrite, says Schönbachler, which is the most common type. These objects contain the oldest material in the solar system and probably originated from the asteroid belt between Mars and Jupiter.

The team will now send the meteorite to Belgium, in a cool

This meteorite may be from the asteroid belt

box to prevent thawing that could damage its delicate chemical structure, for further analysis.

“We don’t tend to find too many meteorites in Antarctica that are as big as this,” says Ashley King at the Natural History Museum in London. “The more meteorite we have, the more sample that we have available for us to study and learn about the early solar system.” ■