

'Comet of the century' set to fire across our skies

BY LINDA STEWART - 25 November 2013

A [Belfast](#) astronomer appeared on the BBC's Horizon programme at the weekend in an episode devoted to a sun-grazing comet travelling through [Northern Ireland's](#) skies.

The comet is expected to graze the surface of our sun just before the end of November. Astronomers will be holding their breath to see whether the huge forces it experiences as it skims the sun will cause it to split.

Professor Alan Fitzsimmons explained why comet C/2012 S1 (ISON) is so important.

The body is racing towards earth from the Oort cloud, the home of the comets - a vast swarm of rocky snowballs stretching almost halfway to our nearest star.

"Comet ISON was discovered last year, and astronomers quickly realised that it was a one-of-a-kind comet. It has never been around the sun before, but on November 28 it will pass just over a million kilometres above its surface. The intense heat may reveal aspects about comets we have never before discovered," Professor Fitzsimmons said."

Professor Fitzsimmons studies comets and asteroids in the Astrophysics Research Centre at Queen's.

Comet ISON has been hyped as a potential comet of the century. It has only become bright enough to be seen in the pre-dawn sky during the past week, with a tail millions of kilometres long.

In the first week of December, the comet should reappear low-down in the sky before sunrise.



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