

NASA to send a drone to Saturn's largest moon

Dragonfly mission will look for evidence of life in Titan

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For its next mission in our solar system, NASA plans to fly a drone copter to Saturn's largest moon Titan in search of the building blocks of life, the space agency said on Thursday.

The Dragonfly mission, which will launch in 2026 and land in 2034, will send a rotorcraft to fly to dozens of locations across the icy moon, which has a substantial atmosphere and is viewed by scientists as an equivalent of very early-era earth.

It is the only celestial body besides our planet known to have liquid rivers, lakes and seas on its surface, though these contain hydrocarbons like methane and ethane, not water.



The mission will be launched in 2026 and land in 2034. ■AFP

"This cutting-edge mission would have been unthinkable even just a few years ago, but we're now ready for Dragonfly's amazing flight," said NASA administrator Jim Bridenstine.

NASA said the vehicle would have eight rotors and fly like a large drone.

"During its 2.7-year base-

line mission, Dragonfly will explore diverse environments from organic dunes to the floor of an impact crater where liquid water and complex organic materials key to life once existed together for possibly tens of thousands of years," NASA said.

"Its instruments will study how far prebiotic chemistry may have progressed. They also will investigate the moon's atmospheric and surface properties and its subsurface ocean and liquid reservoirs. "Additionally, instruments will search for chemical evidence of past or extant life."

The craft will land first at the equatorial "Shangri-La" dune, exploring the region in short trips before building up to longer "leapfrog" flights of 8 km.