APR14-2014-020115

Abstract for an Invited Paper
for the APR14 Meeting of
the American Physical Society

Fireworks at the Galactic Center black hole?

STEFAN GILLESSEN, The Max Planck Institute for Extraterrestrial Physics

The center of the Milky Way hosts a gravity monster. A mass 4 million times larger than that of the Sun is concentrated there in a volume comparable to the solar system. A black hole is by far the most reasonable explanation for that. It is the closest supermassive black hole, and it is on a diet. The flow of material onto it is so small, that it shines just 200 times brighter than the Sun. But that might change in the near future. Just 2 years ago, astronomers at the Max-Planck-Institute for extraterrestrial physics have discovered a gas cloud of 3 Earth masses, that is heading almost directly at the black hole. Early 2014 the cloud will reach its point of closest approach. The tidal forces of the black hole will completely disrupt the cloud then–and the onset of the process has been observed with exquisite detail already. Some fraction of the material might then fall into the black hole–increasing its accretion rate and thereby also its luminosity. Astronomer all around the globe are quite keen on observing what will happen in the Galactic Center in the next few years.