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Asteroid Rotation Discovery Reported

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A Northern Ireland-led study suggests an asteroid's increased rotational speed is due to a solar effect that was predicted but never before seen.

Using multiple telescopes, an international team of astronomers discovered a small near Earth asteroid's rotational speed increased 1 millisecond every year as a consequence of the heating of the asteroid's surface by the sun. Eventually it may spin faster than any known asteroid in the solar system and break apart.

The Yarkovsky-O'Keefe-Radzievskii-Paddack (YORP) effect is believed to alter the way small bodies in the solar system rotate, said Stephen Lowry of Queens University in Belfast, lead author of one of two papers in which the research is reported.

The warming caused by sunlight hitting the surfaces of asteroids and meteoroids leads to a gentle recoil effect as the heat is released, he said. By analogy, if one were to shine light on a propeller over a long enough period, it would start spinning.

The research -- involving telescopes and other instruments located in Chile, Spain, Puerto Rico, the Czech Republic, the Canary Islands and Hawaii -- appears in the journal Science Express.

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