Whew! Big asteroid no longer threat to Earth

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WASHINGTON (AP) -- Upon further review, a big scary-sounding asteroid is no longer even a remote threat to smash into Earth in about 20 years, NASA says.

Astronomers got a much better look at the asteroid when it whizzed by Earth on Wednesday from a relative safe 9 million miles away. They recalculated the space rock's trajectory and determined it wasn't on a path to hit Earth on April 13, 2036 as once feared possible.

At more than 1,060 feet wide, the rock called Apophis could do significant damage to a local area if it hit and perhaps even cause a tsunami. But it was not large enough to trigger worldwide extinctions. One prominent theory that explains the extinctions of dinosaurs and other species 65 million years ago says a six-mile-wide meteorite hit Earth and spewed vast amounts of dust into the air, cooling and darkening the planet.

About nine years ago, when astronomers first saw Apophis (uh-PAH'-fihs), they thought there was a 2.7 percent chance that it would smack into our planet. Later, they lowered the chances to an even more unlikely 1 in 250,000.

Now it's never mind.

"Certainly 2036 is ruled out," said Donald Yeomans, manager of NASA's Near Earth Object Program. "It's why we track them so we can be assured that they won't get dangerously close."

Yeomans said now the asteroid, named after an evil Egyptian mythical serpent, won't get closer than 19,400 miles. That's still the closest approach asteroid watchers have seen for a rock this large. And when astronomers got a closer look they noticed it was about 180 feet larger than they thought, but not a threat.

Asteroids circle the sun as leftovers of failed attempts to form planets billions of years ago. When asteroids enter Earth's atmosphere, they become meteors and when they hit the ground they are meteorites.

This is the second time in as many months the asteroid watchers have had good news for Earth. Last month, astronomers got a closer look at a smaller asteroid that they had previously calculated had a 1 in 500 chance of hitting Earth, this time in 2040. And they decided the 460-foot asteroid was no longer a threat.

If you still want to see a space rock come cosmically close to Earth, there's always next month.

On Feb. 15, a small asteroid, only 130-feet wide, will come close to Earth, about

17,000 miles above the equator. That's so close it will come between our planet and some of the more distant satellites that circle the globe. But it will miss Earth.

"This will be the closest passage of an object this size," Yeomans said.

That asteroid, called 2012 DA14, should be visible with smaller telescopes and binoculars, but mostly in Eastern Europe, Asia and Australia, he said.

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