

CIRCULAR ORBIT AROUND A SUPERMASSIVE BLACK HOLE

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Suppose we are unfortunate enough to be orbiting a supermassive black hole with a mass of 10^6 solar masses. For the sun, $GM = 1.477$ km, so for the black hole, $GM = 1.477 \times 10^6$ km. The radius of the orbit is $r = 10GM = 1.477 \times 10^7$ km. For comparison, the average earth-sun distance is 1.5×10^8 km, so this orbit is about 10 times closer to the black hole than Earth is to the sun. A rather frightening prospect.

From its radius, we can work out the energy and angular momentum per unit mass. From the formula for angular momentum as measured by the orbiting object:

$$\ell^2 = \frac{r^2 GM}{r - 3GM} \quad (1)$$

$$= \frac{100(GM)^2}{7} \quad (2)$$

$$\ell = \frac{10}{\sqrt{7}} GM \quad (3)$$

$$= 5.58 \times 10^6 \text{ km} \quad (4)$$

The energy is

$$\tilde{E} = -\frac{GM}{2r} \left(1 - \frac{3GM}{r}\right)^{-1} \left(1 - \frac{4GM}{r}\right) \quad (5)$$

$$= -\frac{0.6}{20 \times 0.7} \quad (6)$$

$$= -0.043 \quad (7)$$

The period of the orbit as measured by the spacecraft can be found from

$$\ell = r^2\omega \quad (8)$$

$$= \frac{2\pi r^2}{T} \quad (9)$$

$$T = \frac{2\pi r^2}{\ell} \quad (10)$$

$$= \frac{200\sqrt{7}\pi}{10}GM \quad (11)$$

$$= 166GM \quad (12)$$

$$= 2.455 \times 10^8 \text{ km} \quad (13)$$

$$= 821 \text{ s} \quad (14)$$

$$= 13.7 \text{ minutes} \quad (15)$$