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Revised upper limits for abundances of NH₃, HCN and HC₃N in the Martian atmosphere

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Abstract

The Atmospheric Chemistry Suite (ACS) onboard the ExoMars Trace Gas Orbiter (TGO) spacecraft has been studying Mars' atmosphere since 2018. The sensitivity of the middle infrared channel (MIR) allows it to address many ardent topics and it is capable of improving and establishing upper limits for many trace species. In this work we present analysis of transmittance spectra in the 3332.5-3338.6 cm⁻¹ range with 30,000 resolution ($\lambda/\Delta\lambda$), covering absorptions lines of three nitrogen-bearing species: ammonia (NH₃), hydrogen cyanide (HCN) and cyanoacetylene (HC₃N). According to existing models, all of those are not expected to be present in a CO₂-rich Martian atmosphere, but outgassing or unknown chemistry sources cannot be discounted. The upper limits of 14, 1.5 and 11 ppbv are obtained for NH₃, HCN and HC₃N from individual occultation measurements during the warm and dusty perihelion season of martian year 36. For the ammonia and hydrogen cyanide the upper limits are improved compared to previously published results. A search for cyanoacetylene on Mars is reported for the first time.

Keywords: IR spectroscopy; Mars, atmosphere; Atmospheres, composition

Main

Molecular nitrogen is the second most abundant species (2.8%) after CO₂ in the Martian atmosphere (Franz et al., 2017). Soil contains oxidised nitrogen-bearing compounds (Stern et al., 2015; Sutter et al., 2017). Also the chemically-derivatized molecules ammonia (NH₃) and hydrogen cyanide (HCN) were detected from sand, among others, with the wet chemistry experiments of the Sample Analysis at Mars (SAM) instrument on NASA's Curiosity rover (Millan et al., 2022). The combination of an elevated abundance of derivatized ammonia and several N-bearing organic species detected in the follow-up analyses suggested that indigenous N-bearing molecules are present in the soil. At the same time, expected atmospheric processes involving nitrogen are limited (Lefèvre and Krasnopolsky, 2017), because the strong N–N bond makes N₂ a relatively inert species. Odd-nitrogen species, N and NO, can be produced as a result of N₂ dissociation at high altitudes only. The nitrogen chemistry in the lower atmosphere thus greatly depends on the downward fluxes. As calculated by the general circulation model of Moudden and McConnell (2007), main nitrogen species below 40 kilometres are NO and NO₂, varying in tiny abundances from 0.1 ppbv to 0.25 ppbv. The current knowledge for NO₂ is <10 ppbv (Maguire, 1977) and less than 1.7 ppb for NO (Krasnopolsky, 2006) The sensitivity of the mid-infrared channel of the Atmospheric Chemistry Suite (ACS MIR) approaches the expected NO₂ 0.2 ppbv absorption features in the 2915 cm⁻¹

48band, which will be a subject of a separate study. Not considering any release processes, other
49nitrogen components are modelled to be orders of magnitude less abundant, like the pptv level
50concentrations of HNO₄ near 20 km in altitude.

51 In this work we present upper limits of somewhat unexpected molecules for Mars:
52ammonia, hydrogen cyanide and cyanoacetylene derived from ACS MIR data. The first two
53have been already searched for on Mars, the third has not yet been considered.

54 As in the case of methane (CH₄), the ammonia could be considered as a biomarker. But
55in contrast to methane, whose lifetime is considered to be on the order of a hundred years
56(Lefèvre and Krasnopolsky, 2017), ammonia is not a stable molecule in the atmosphere of Mars
57and would be quickly photolyzed within hours. Hydrogen cyanide is also not expected to be
58produced in the Martian atmosphere (Mancinelli and Banin, 2003): its permanent presence
59would require a continuous source, like active volcanoes or biota, both actively sought, but
60never detected on Mars.

61 The first NH₃ 3 ? upper limit of 8 ppbv was set by the Mariner 9 Infrared Interferometer
62Spectrometer (IRIS; Maguire, 1977). The results were obtained from an average of spectra
63from all over the planet, covering a full Martian year (MY), starting from L_s = 293° in MY 9. In
642004, the detection of ammonia in the atmosphere of Mars by the Planetary Fourier
65Spectrometer (PFS) was announced; the report was not followed by a publication. The NH₃
66was then sought using NIRSPEC at Keck-2 observatory (Villanueva et al., 2013). The
67observations at L_s = 352° in MY 27 provided a 57 ppbv 3 ? upper limit, and at L_s = 83° in MY
6830, a 45 ppbv upper limit. In parallel, they have established HCN upper limits of 4.5 and 2.1
69ppbv, respectively.

70 HC₃N was not considered as a goal for Martian atmospheric surveys, while it has a
71notable astrochemical importance (e.g. Thelen et al., 2019; Jiang et al., 2017). The most recent
72version of the spectroscopy database HITRAN2020 (Gordon et al., 2022) includes, for the first
73time, ro-vibrational transitions relative to all seven vibrational modes of HC₃N up to 3400 cm⁻¹,
74and rotational data in the ground state and many vibrational states of all normal modes. In this
75work, we used the recently documented band around 3327 cm⁻¹ to set the first upper limit on
76HC₃N in Mars atmosphere.

77 The ACS package for the Trace Gas Orbiter (TGO) is a part of the ExoMars mission
78(Korablev et al., 2018; Vago et al., 2015). ACS includes the mid-infrared channel (MIR), a
79versatile instrument for the spectral range 2.3-4.2 μm. It is a cross-dispersion echelle
80instrument dedicated to solar occultation measurements. The resolving power of 30,000 and a
81signal-to-noise ratio (SNR) of 5,000 per pixel per 2 s acquisition make it perfect for detecting
82weak absorptions (Trokhimovskiy et al., 2020; Olsen et al., 2020). We use the ACS MIR
83measurements obtained using secondary grating position 13, which includes 27 diffraction
84orders (190-216) encompassing a spectral range of 3178-3643 cm⁻¹. Order 199 covers a range
853330.5-3355.1 cm⁻¹, where all three gases, NH₃, HCN, and HC₃N, have absorption lines. This
86range also contains CO₂ and H₂O lines, which are used for additional pixel-to-wavenumber
87calibration. To retrieve upper limits in this work, we used a narrower 3332.5-3338.6 cm⁻¹ fitting
88window (see Figure 1 Panel A for model spectra of sought gases and data example).

89 Regular and optimised position 13 measurements have started mid MY 36. The dataset
90analysed includes 135 ACS MIR occultations performed in MY 36 during southern summer at
91the perihelion season (L_s = 212°-360°; TGO orbits 19,656-22,705). The observation period is
92characterised by greater dust load, higher temperatures, elevation of water vapour up to
93120 km (Belyaev et al., 2021; Fedorova et al., 2023). Recently discovered by ACS, hydrogen
94chloride is being observed exceptionally in the perihelion season (Korablev et al., 2021; Olsen
95et al., 2021), emphasising more active atmospheric chemistry. The observed latitudes range

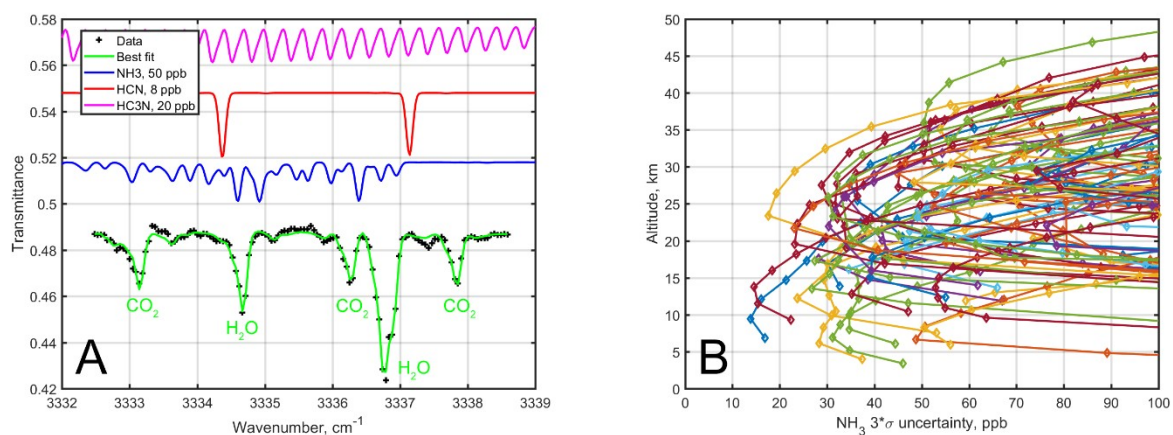
96 from -77°S to 90°N , with the majority of occultations occurring at high latitudes (Korablev et al., 972018).

98 The retrieval is performed by the iterative Levenberg–Marquardt iterative algorithm with
99 Tikhonov regularisation developed to analyse data from SPICAM IR spectrometer on Mars
100 Express (Fedorova et al., 2018) and TGO's ACS near-infrared channel (NIR) data (Fedorova et al.
101 a., 2020) and adapted for ACS MIR data (Trokhimovskiy et al., 2021; Fedorova et al., 2022).
102 The CO_2 density and temperature profiles were not retrieved, but taken from ACS NIR
103 simultaneous measurements (Korablev et al., 2018; Fedorova et al., 2023). The free
104 parameters are aerosol extinction and volume mixing ratios of gases. In the absence of
105 detection, the uncertainty on the retrieved quantities is given by the covariance matrix of the
106 solution, which defines the upper limit. The retrieved values are generally within a 1σ
107 from zero; we present the three-sigma upper limits as a confident non-detection case. The
108 vertical dependence of the upper limits is typical for occultation experiments and for Mars
109 reaches the best values at altitudes of about 10-25 km. At higher altitudes, the line-of-sight
110 captures only a miserable number of searched molecules, at lower altitudes the signal is
111 diminished by aerosol load. On Figure 1 Panel B we present a collection of three-sigma upper
112 limits for NH_3 from different orbits. The vertical pattern for HCN and HC_3N is similar.

113 The best upper limits are achieved at $L_s = 233^{\circ}$, latitude 64°N and altitude 10 km, and
114 accordingly for NH_3 , HCN and HC_3N are 14, 1.5 and 11 ppbv. Tens of observations provide
115 upper limits below 33, 3.5 and 30 ppbv at high latitudes in both hemispheres during the whole
116 season observed. The upper limit for HC_3N is not restrictive since HCN is typically the most
117 abundant nitrile. At lower latitudes, with more aerosols and less occultations available, the best
118 upper limits by ACS MIR for NH_3 , HCN and HC_3N were 114, 12 and 95 ppbv. These numbers
119 were achieved at $L_s = 287^{\circ}$, latitude -12°S and altitude 39 km.

120 The upper limits for ammonia and hydrogen cyanide are several times below those
121 obtained by Villanueva et al. (2013) for the end of MY 27. Moreover, the ACS data cover the
122 entire perihelion season and different latitudes. The upper limits for cyanoacetylene in the
123 Martian atmosphere are obtained for the first time. Tracing these species, unexpected on Mars,
124 with stringent upper limits is important to monitor potential outgassing events and constrain
125 chemical models. As the ExoMars mission continues, ACS will extend the trace species search
126 further.

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130 Figure 1. Panel A. Example of ACS MIR data from order 199 and the best fit at tangent
131 altitude 18 km, orbit 21352 N1, $L_s = 299^{\circ}$, latitude -55°S . The model spectra for NH_3 , HCN and
132 HC_3N are shown shifted and with abundances of 50, 8 and 20 ppbv, respectively. The

133noticeable lines fitted in the data are due to CO₂ and are located at 3333.1, 3336.2 and 3337.8
134cm⁻¹, the H₂O line is at 3334.6 cm⁻¹ and a doublet around 3336.8 cm⁻¹. Panel B. The vertical
135dependency of the three-sigma upper limits for ammonia from the ACS MIR solar occultation
136observations. The vertical pattern for HCN and HC₃N is similar. Different colours stand for
137distinct occultations.

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