NuSTAR J163433-4738.7: A Fast X-ray Transient in the Galactic Plane

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**NuSTAR J163433–4738.7: A FAST X-RAY TRANSIENT IN THE GALACTIC PLANE**


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**ABSTRACT**

During hard X-ray observations of the Norma spiral arm region by the Nuclear Spectroscopic Telescope Array (NuSTAR) in 2013 February, a new transient source, NuSTAR J163433–4738.7, was detected at a significance level of 8σ in the 3–10 keV bandpass. The source is consistent with having a constant NuSTAR count rate over a period of 40 ks and is also detected simultaneously by Swift at lower significance. The source is not significantly detected by NuSTAR, Swift, or Chandra in the days before or weeks after the discovery of the transient, indicating that the strong X-ray activity lasted between ~0.5 and 1.5 days. Near-infrared imaging observations were carried out before and after the X-ray activity, but we are not able to identify the counterpart. The combined NuSTAR and Swift energy spectrum is consistent with a power law with a photon index of $\Gamma = 4.1^{+1.5}_{-1.0}$ (90% confidence errors), a blackbody with $kT = 1.2 \pm 0.3$ keV, or a Bremsstrahlung model with $kT = 3.0^{+2.1}_{-1.2}$ keV. The reduced-$\chi^2$ values for the three models are not significantly different, ranging from 1.23 to 1.44 for 8 degrees of freedom. The spectrum is strongly absorbed with $N_H = (2.8^{+2.3}_{-1.4}) \times 10^{23}$ cm$^{-2}$, $(9^{+15}_{-7}) \times 10^{23}$ cm$^{-2}$, and $(1.7^{+1.7}_{-0.7}) \times 10^{23}$ cm$^{-2}$, for the power-law, blackbody, and Bremsstrahlung models, respectively. Although the high column density could be due to material local to the source, it is consistent with absorption from interstellar material along the line of sight at a distance of 11 kpc, which would indicate an X-ray luminosity $>10^{34}$ erg s$^{-1}$. Although we do not reach a definitive determination of the nature of NuSTAR J163433–4738.7, we suggest that it may be an unusually bright active binary or a magnetar.

**Key words:** Galaxy: stellar content – stars: variables: general – surveys – X-rays: individual (NuSTAR)

**Online-only material:** color figures

1. INTRODUCTION

Hard X-ray surveys of the Galaxy provide an opportunity to discover populations of extreme sources. The promise of such surveys has been partially realized with the International Gamma-Ray Astrophysics Laboratory (INTEGRAL; Winkler et al. 2003), which carried out a 20–100 keV survey of the entire Galactic plane and has discovered hundreds of new sources (Bird et al. 2010; Krivonos et al. 2012), including new types of high-mass X-ray binaries (HMXBs), pulsar wind nebulae, and magnetic cataclysmic variables (CVs). The Nuclear Spectroscopic Telescope Array (NuSTAR; Harrison et al. 2013), which launched in 2012 June and covers the 3–79 keV bandpass, is the first focusing hard X-ray telescope in orbit. While it has a much smaller field of view than INTEGRAL does, it has a much lower background and greatly improved sensitivity. Thus, one of NuSTAR’s science goals is to extend our view deeper into the Galactic plane to look for hidden hard X-ray populations.

During its first year of operation, NuSTAR has initiated surveys of ~1 deg$^2$ areas both in the Galactic center (e.g., Mori et al. 2013; Nynka et al. 2013) and in a region that samples the spiral arm population in order to probe potentially different environments where X-ray binaries are found. A spiral arm region centered on Galactic coordinates of $l = 337.5$° and $b = 0$° was chosen for having the highest known density of OB star associations (Russell 2003) and HMXBs (Bodaghee et al. 2007, 2012). This is part of the Norma spiral arm region, which was identified early in the INTEGRAL mission as having an unusually high density of hard X-ray sources (Tomsick et al. 2004; Dean et al. 2005; Lutovinov et al. 2005). The combination of active star formation and evidence that compact objects have already formed suggests that a survey by NuSTAR may uncover compact objects associated with populations of massive stars such as magnetars or faint HMXBs that are early in their evolutionary process and may have neutron star or black hole accretors.
The full surveys of the Galactic Center and the Norma region will be carried out over a period of ~2 yr; here, we report on the discovery of a transient source made during the first part of the survey. In this paper, Section 2 describes observations made with NuSTAR, Swift, and Chandra, as well as the procedures we used to reduce the data. The results are presented in Section 3, and we discuss possibilities for the nature of the transient in Section 4.

2. OBSERVATIONS AND DATA REDUCTION

As the first part of the NuSTAR survey of the Norma region, nine ~20 ks NuSTAR observations were performed between UT 2013 February 20 and 24. Each 13′ × 13′ field of view was partially overlapping with adjacent pointings, and the entire region covered was ~0.2 deg². The results from all nine pointings will be reported in Bodaghee et al. (2014). Here, we focus on the observations that covered a new transient, NuSTAR J163433−4738.7. These observations are listed in Table 1, including two that were obtained during the survey and a follow-up NuSTAR observation on 2013 March 23 that was coordinated with Chandra.

In addition, ~2 ks Swift X-Ray Telescope observations of the region were carried out during 2013 February 21–24, and four of these observations covered NuSTAR J163433−4738.7. Table 1 lists these along with three other Swift observations that were acquired after our survey as part of another observing program. We also analyzed archival data covering the source, including two Chandra observations (ObsIDs 12529 and 12532 with exposure times of 19.0 ks and 19.5 ks, respectively) that were acquired in 2011 as part of a survey of the same region being covered by NuSTAR (Fornasini et al. 2014).

We reduced the NuSTAR and Swift data using HEASOFT v6.14 and the latest version of the Calibration Database files as of 2013 August 30. We produced cleaned event lists for the NuSTAR focal plane modules A and B (FPMA and FPMB) using nupipeline and for the Swift X-Ray Telescope using xrtpipeline, and further analysis of the event lists is subsequently described. For Chandra, we processed the Advanced CCD Imaging Spectrometer (Garmire et al. 2003) data with the Chandra Interactive Analysis of Observations software, using chandra_repro to make event lists.

We obtained near-infrared observations covering the NuSTAR J163433−4738.7 error region. This includes J, H, and Ks observations performed on 2011 July 19 with CTIO/NEWFIRM in the framework of near-infrared mapping of the Chandra survey field. A detailed description of the data and their reduction can be found in F. Rahoui et al. (in preparation). They were reduced with the dedicated IRAF package NEFEXTERN following the standard procedure—tailored for wide-field mosaics—which consists of bad pixel removal, dark subtraction, linearity correction, flatfielding, and median sky subtraction. The resulting images were then flux-calibrated through relative photometry with the 2MASS catalogue. We also obtained Ks-band imaging with the Ohio-State Infra-Red Imager/Spectrometer (OSIRIS) at the Southern Astrophysical Research 4.1 m Telescope. We used the f/7 camera, providing a 80′′ field of view, centered at the nominal coordinates of NuSTAR J163433−4738.7. We obtained 36 × 60 s dithered exposures of the field on 2013 April 3 under good conditions with seeing of 0.7′′, and observed it for 9 × 60 s again on 2013 April 5, also under good conditions but with somewhat worse seeing of 1.0′′. Reductions were done using the XDIMSUM IRAF package and photometric calibration was obtained by comparing to 2MASS All-Sky Point Source Catalog sources in the field.

3. RESULTS

The new transient was discovered from an inspection of the image from the 22.6 ks NuSTAR observation that took place starting on 2013 February 23, 14.52 hr. As shown in Figure 1, the source was detected in FPMA and FPMB. To determine the significance of the detection, we extracted 3–10 keV counts from a 30′′ radius circle centered on the approximate position...
The background level was determined using a nearby source-free circular region with a radius of 90″. We performed χ² fitting of the histograms with a model consisting of a constant (accounting for the flat background) and a Gaussian for the source. It should be noted that this is an approximation of a constant (accounting for the flat background) and a Gaussian near the source-free circular region with a radius of 90″ of the source. We determined the background level using a constant with an 8.0σ confidence level.

To determine the source position, we extracted all of the events from a 60″ × 60″ square region and made histograms of the counts, binning in the R.A. and decl. directions. We performed χ² fitting of the histograms with a model consisting of a constant (accounting for the flat background) and a Gaussian for the source. It should be noted that this is an approximation since the NuSTAR point spread function is non-Gaussian. We determined the centroids separately for FPMA and FPMB, and they are consistent with each other. The combined significance is 8.0σ, confirming the detection.

Figure 1. NuSTAR discovery images in the 3–20 keV energy band for NuSTAR J163433–4738.7. The source was detected in both of the NuSTAR focal plane modules A and B in a 22.6 ks exposure taken on 2013 February 23–24. The images have been rebinned so that the pixel size is 2.5″ and smoothed with a 6 pixel Gaussian. The scale on the bottom of the figure is in counts per pixel, and a logarithmic scaling is used. The apparent elongation of the source is due to the distorted point spread function shape at large off-axis angles.

(A color version of this figure is available in the online journal.)

The source position was extracted from the NuSTAR J163433–4738.7, but we did not find any likely candidates. The catalog from the 2011 Swift observations (F. M. Fornasini et al., submitted) does not have any sources in the NuSTAR J163433–4738.7 error region. On the basis of this and the analysis subsequently described (including a reanalysis of the 2011 Chandra observations), we conclude that NuSTAR J163433–4738.7 is a previously undetected source and that it is very likely to be a transient given the sensitivity of the Swift and Chandra. In all cases, we quote the 1σ error bars if the minimum of the 1σ error region is positive. Otherwise, we give the 90% confidence upper limit. While the NuSTAR observation taken on February 23 provides the only highly significant detection, the Swift observation with the highest count rate is the one that occurred during this NuSTAR observation. The only other possible evidence for activity from NuSTAR J163433–4738.7 occurred on February 22, when NuSTAR obtained a 2.7σ detection in focal plane module A; however, this is not confirmed by the focal plane module B data.

For the Chandra ObsIDs 12529 and 12532 (from 2011) and ObsID 15625 (from 2013), we analyzed the Advanced CCD Imaging Spectrometer data to search for a detection of NuSTAR J163433–4738.7. On the basis of an inspection, no sources are apparent in the 0.3–10 keV or 3–10 keV images. The source is 7″ and 5″ from the Chandra aimpoint for the 2011 ObsIDs. At these off-axis angles, the 90% encircled energy fraction (EEF) radii (for 4.5 keV photons) are 7.4 and 4.5″ for ObsIDs 12529 and 12532, respectively. ObsID 15625 was a dedicated pointing with the target on-axis, and the 90% EEF radius is 2″. For ObsID 12529, the largest number of 3–10 keV counts within any 7.4 radius circle inside the NuSTAR error region is three, and, accounting for background, we calculate a 90% confidence upper limit of < 1.9 × 10⁻⁴ s⁻¹ on the count rate (see Table 1).
absorption using Wilms et al. (2000) abundances and Verner a thermal Bremsstrahlung model. In all three cases, we included using the XSPEC software package. The statistical quality of the fitted jointly by minimizing the Cash (or $\chi^2$) values, and they appear in Table 2. This quantity is slightly of freedom) compared with the blackbody model ($\chi^2 = 1.23$ for 8 degrees of freedom) compared to the power-law model ($\chi^2 = 2.7$ for 8 degrees of freedom). Although we used the C-statistic to determine the parameters, we also calculated the reduced-\$chi^2$ values, and they appear in Table 2. This quantity is slightly for the power-law model ($\chi^2 = 1.23$ for 8 degrees of freedom), power-law model ($\chi^2 = 1.24$ for 8 degrees of freedom) compared to the power-law model ($\chi^2 = 1.23$ for 8 degrees of freedom), 0.00005, $\nu = 8$ for the 2–10 keV unabsorbed flux in units of $10^{-12}$ erg cm$^{-2}$ s$^{-1}$. We fitted the spectra by minimizing the Cash statistic.

We used the absorbed blackbody model and the count rates for NuSTAR, Swift, and Chandra given in Table 1 to calculate measurements or upper limits on the absorbed 3–10 keV flux, and these flux histories are shown in Figure 4. We also calculated the flux upper limits for the Chandra observations from 2011. The upper limits on the absorbed 3–10 keV fluxes are $< 1.6 \times 10^{-14}$ erg cm$^{-2}$ s$^{-1}$ and $< 2.5 \times 10^{-14}$ erg cm$^{-2}$ s$^{-1}$ for ObsIDs 12529 and 12532, respectively. Although the count rate limits are considerably lower for these ObsIDs compared with Chandra ObsID 15625, the flux limits are similar because of the different effective areas for the ACIS-I and ACIS-S instruments. The lowest Chandra upper limit indicates that the flux from this source changed by at least a factor of 39$^{+6}_{-4}$, suggesting that it is a transient rather than simply being a highly variable X-ray source.

The NuSTAR error circle includes dozens of near-infrared candidate counterparts brighter than $K_s \sim 17$ (Vega magnitude system). In the NEWFIRM images from 2011, the brightest source in the error circle (2MASS J16343288–4738393) has $K_s = 12.33 \pm 0.05$, $H = 13.07 \pm 0.06$, and $J = 14.61 \pm 0.05$, and the 2MASS magnitudes are consistent, indicating a possible lack of variability on long timescales. The next two brightest sources are 2MASS J16343362–4738479 at $K_s = 13.31 \pm 0.05$ and the Spitzer/GLIMPSE source G336.7870+00.0111 at $K_s = 14.70 \pm 0.05$. These may be more likely counterparts to NuSTAR J163433–47387 because they are relatively highly reddened ($H−K_s = 2.35 \pm 0.08$ and 1.34 $\pm 0.08$, respectively). However, we do not find any evidence that these sources are variable. For the two OSIRIS $K_s$ images taken on April 3 and April 5, we performed aperture photometry for all of the sources within the NuSTAR error circle, but did not find any variable sources.

The high time-resolution of the NuSTAR data allows for a search for a coherent signal with periods $P \gtrsim 4$ ms, covering the range expected for either an isolated rotation-powered pulsar, a binary, or a magnetar. Given the paucity of source counts in the observations listed in Table 1, we concentrate our attention on the ObsID 40014007001 data. Photon arrival times, adjusted for the NuSTAR clock drift, were corrected to the Solar System barycenter using JPL DE200 ephemeris and the NuSTAR derived source coordinates. We extracted photons in the 3–10 keV band from a 30$''$ radius aperture centered on the source to optimize the signal-to-noise ratio. We searched for significant power from a coherent signal using an fast Fourier transform (FFT) sampled at the Nyquist frequency. The observation span was too short to consider the smearing of the pulse profile by spin-down of even the most highly energetic pulsar or the typical binary orbit period. The most significant signal found has a power of $P = 35.18$, corresponding to a probability of false detection.
Figure 3. *NuSTAR* and *Swift* energy spectra for NuSTAR J163433–4738.7 on 2013 February 23–24 fitted with an absorbed blackbody model. The black, blue, and red data points and model lines correspond to the X-Ray Telescope, focal plane module A, and focal plane module B, respectively. The errors on the data points are 1σ confidence.

(A color version of this figure is available in the online journal.)

**Figure 4.** *NuSTAR*, *Swift*, and *Chandra* (marked with diamonds, filled circles, and a square, respectively) absorbed 3–10 keV fluxes for NuSTAR J163433–4738.7 assuming an absorbed blackbody with a column density of $N_H = 9 \times 10^{22}$ cm$^{-2}$ and a temperature of 1.2 keV. The errors on the data points are 1σ significance, and the upper limits are 90% confidence.

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4. DISCUSSION

In considering the nature of NuSTAR J163433–4738.7, it is useful to estimate the X-ray luminosity that the source reached during its outburst. Although the distance is highly uncertain, the strong absorption indicates either a large distance through a region of the Galaxy with heavy extinction or absorption local to the source. The former is a strong possibility because the transient is in the direction of a region of the Galactic plane that is crowded with H II/molecular cloud regions. NuSTAR J163433–4738.7 is at $l = 336:787, b = +0:014$, near a group of H II regions (336.732+0.072, 336.840+0.047, 336.9–0.1, 337.147–0.181, and 337.3–0.1) at a distance of 10.9 ± 0.2 kpc (Georgelin et al. 1996; Russeil 2003). If the absorption is interstellar, then NuSTAR J163433–4738.7 is very likely beyond or in these molecular clouds, indicating a 2–10 keV unabsorbed luminosity limit of $>9 \times 10^{33}$ erg s$^{-1}$ for the blackbody spectrum and $>1.4 \times 10^{34}$ erg s$^{-1}$ for Bremsstrahlung. In the following, we consider both possibilities: a distance of ~11 kpc and a peak luminosity of $\sim 10^{34}$ erg s$^{-1}$; and a smaller distance with absorption local to the source and a lower luminosity.

Considering the first possibility, a luminosity as high as $10^{34}$ erg s$^{-1}$ would be unprecedented for at least two common types of X-ray sources in the Galaxy. Nonmagnetic CVs have strong optical outbursts along with persistent and transient X-ray emission. However, extensive studies have shown that their X-ray luminosities are in the $10^{29–32}$ erg s$^{-1}$ range (Baskill et al. 2005; Kuulkers et al. 2006). While magnetic CVs can reach higher luminosities (Kuulkers et al. 2006), they do not typically show outbursts. Second, active binaries, including RS CVn systems and low-mass flare stars, produce X-ray flares, some of which can last for about a day. Superflares that peak at X-ray luminosities of $10^{22–33}$ erg s$^{-1}$ have been seen (Franciosini et al. 2001; Osten et al. 2007, 2010; Pandey & Singh 2012), and there have been flares that have released $>10^{37}$ erg (Franciosini et al. 2001). If NuSTAR J163433–4738.7 is at ~11 kpc, then in addition to having a higher peak luminosity, the energy released is $>4 \times 10^{38}$ erg, which is based on the source being at its peak luminosity for $\gtrsim 40$ ks (see Figure 2).

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17 This kinematic distance is estimated using the mean Galactic rotation curve, and the uncertainty does not account for possible deviations relative to the mean.
In summary, while we do not rule out the active binary possibility (and see later in this paper further discussion on this topic), at the 11 kpc distance, the event seen by NuSTAR would need to be extreme for this explanation to be correct.

A source type that might be a good match to the NuSTAR J163433–4738.7 properties is the class of highly magnetic isolated neutron stars: magnetars. While these sources are best known for their very bright and brief (~0.1 s) X-ray and gamma-ray flares, they also have persistent but variable emission that can easily reach 10^{34} erg s^{-1} or higher (Woods & Thompson 2006). The X-ray spectrum of their persistent emission is dominated by a ~0.5–1 keV blackbody (Woods & Thompson 2006; Mori et al. 2013). Furthermore, as mentioned in Section 1, magnetars are associated with regions where high-mass star formation is occurring, such as the Norma region, and there is a known magnetar, SGR 1627–41, that is ~0.7’ from NuSTAR J163433–4738.7. However, one possible counterargument to the magnetar hypothesis is that magnetar periods of activity usually last for months. From Figure 4, the peak activity from NuSTAR J163433–4738.7 could not have lasted for more than ~1.5 days based on the Swift upper limits, and Chandra and NuSTAR place a tight upper limit on activity ~3 weeks after the NuSTAR detection. While we do not detect pulsations or ~0.1 s flares, which would prove that the source is a magnetar, the pulsation search is limited by the statistical quality of the data, and flaring episodes are relatively rare.

A blackbody spectrum could also be produced from an optically thick accretion disk in a black hole binary. Most often, such sources show temperatures of ~1 keV in the inner parts of their accretion disks when they are at high luminosity ~10^{38–39} erg s^{-1}, which would require a very large distance of ~100–300 kpc for NuSTAR J163433–4738.7. Two sources (GRS 1758–258 and 1E 1740.7–2942) have shown fainter soft INTEGRAL observations. This work was supported under NASA Contract No. NNG08FD60C, and made use of data from the NuSTAR mission, a project led by the California Institute of Technology, managed by the Jet Propulsion Laboratory, and funded by the National Aeronautics and Space Administration. The authors thank the NuSTAR Operations, Software, and Calibration teams for support with the execution and analysis of these observations. This research has made use of the NuSTAR Data Analysis Software (NuSTARDAS) jointly developed by the ASI Science Data Center (Italy) and the California Institute of Technology (USA). R.J.A. was supported by Gemini-CONICYT grant 32120003, and Anillo ACT1101). N.L. wishes to acknowledge the Italian Space Agency (ASI) for financial support by ASI/INAF grant I/037/12/0-011/13. The authors thank Harvey Tananbaum for providing Chandra Director’s Discretionary Time for this project. This research has made use of the SIMBAD database, operated at CDS, Strasbourg, France.

In summary, NuSTAR J163433–4738.7 is a fast X-ray transient that has a thermal spectrum with relatively high temperature (\(kT = 1.2\) keV for a blackbody or 3.0 keV for Bremsstrahlung). If its high column density is due to interstellar material, the source is probably distant (>11 kpc), making the peak luminosity >10^{34} erg s^{-1}. We discuss the origin of the flare and suggest that the most likely possibilities if the source is distant are an unusually bright flare from an active binary or a short outburst from a magnetar. We also consider the possibility that the source is closer and that the absorption is local to the source. More NuSTAR observations in the Galactic plane will determine whether such transients are common and, hopefully, shed light on the nature of NuSTAR J163433–4738.7.

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