NEW PULSATIING DB WHITE DWARF STARS FROM THE SLOAN DIGITAL SKY SURVEY

A. Nitta, S. J. Kleinman, J. Krzesinski, S. O. Kepler, T. S. Metcalfe, Anjum S. Mukadam, Fergal Mullally, R. E. Nather, Denis J. Sullivan, Susan E. Thompson, and D. E. Winget

1 Gemini Observatory, 670 N A’ohoku Pl., Hilo, HI 96720, USA
2 Subaru Telescope, 650 N A’ohoku Pl., Hilo, HI 96720, USA
3 Mount Suhora Observatory, Cracow Pedagogical University, ul. Podchorazych 2, 30-084 Cracow, Poland
4 Instituto de Física, Universidade Federal do Rio Grande do Sul, 91501-970 Porto Alegre, RS, Brazil
5 High Altitude Observatory, National Center for Atmospheric Research, P.O. Box 3000, Boulder CO 80307, USA
6 Department of Astronomy, University of Washington, Seattle, WA 98195-1580, USA
7 Department of Astrophysical Sciences, Princeton University, Princeton, NJ, 08544, USA
8 Astronomy Department, University of Texas at Austin, Austin, TX 78712, USA
9 School of Chemical and Physical Sciences, Victoria University of Wellington, New Zealand
10 Department of Physics and Astronomy, University of Delaware, 223 Sharp Laboratory, Newark, DE 19716, USA

ABSTRACT

We are searching for new He atmosphere white dwarf pulsators (DBVs) based on the newly found white dwarf stars from the spectra obtained by the Sloan Digital Sky Survey. DBVs pulsate at hotter temperature ranges than their better known cousins, the H atmosphere white dwarf pulsators (DAVs or ZZ Ceti stars). Since the evolution of white dwarf stars is characterized by cooling, asteroseismological studies of DBVs give us opportunities to study white dwarf structure at a different evolutionary stage than the DAVs. The hottest DBVs are thought to have neutrino luminosities exceeding their photon luminosities, a quantity measurable through asteroseismology. Therefore, they can also be used to study neutrino physics in the stellar interior. So far we have discovered nine new DBVs, doubling the number of previously known DBVs. Here we report the new pulsators’ light curves and power spectra.

Key words: stars; general – stars; oscillations – stars; variables; other – white dwarfs

1. INTRODUCTION

White dwarf stars (WDs) are the endpoints of evolution for most stars. Their internal structures provide key clues into their complex pre-WD evolution. As WDs, their subsequent evolution is dominated by cooling. The older they are, the cooler they become. Why then, does there exist a range of temperatures within which we hardly see any He atmosphere WDs (DBs) while we see both the H atmosphere WDs (DAs) and non-DAs (He atmosphere DOs and DBs) at both hotter and cooler temperature than this? This paradox is the so-called “DB gap” (Fontaine & Wesemael 1987). Recently, Sloan Digital Sky Survey (SDSS) data have shown us that the DB gap is not completely void of DBs, but rather deficient in the number of DBs (Eisenstein et al. 2006a). The current best explanation for this effect is based on WDs having specific layer masses (the large gravity in a WD makes it compositionally stratified) which mix and settle at certain temperatures, causing the surface “flavor” of a WD to change with time and temperature (Fontaine & Wesemael 1987). This explanation demands a thin H layer in at least a substantial fraction of DAs. However, there have been several works (Fontaine et al. 1992, 1994; Clemens 1994; Robinson et al. 1995; Kleinman et al. 1998; Benvenuto et al. 2002) suggesting that perhaps all DAs have thick H layers and if so, spectral evolution by the current model cannot happen.

Once a WD cools past the onset of its instability strip (at a temperature primarily determined by its atmospheric composition and total mass), it begins pulsating in a series of nonradial g-modes, allowing us to study its interior via the technique of asteroseismology. Asteroseismology, the study of stellar pulsations, is an important way to directly measure quantities of the stellar interior. And understanding the interior structure of the DBVs is one very important way to address some of the mysteries of DB evolution. Among the nine DBVs known prior to our work, the first DBV discovered (Winget et al. 1982), GD 358, is by far the best-studied WD pulsator. It has had its internal structure substantially explored by asteroseismology (Winget et al. 1994; Bradley & Winget 1994; Vuille et al. 2000; Metcalfe et al. 2002, 2005; Metcalfe 2003; Kepler et al. 2005a). The results from the asteroseismological investigations of GD 358 (Winget et al., 1994) are impressive: total mass of $0.61 \pm 0.03 M_\odot$, He layer mass of $\log M_{\text{He}}/M_\odot = -5.7(\pm0.18, -0.30)$, $R_*/R_\odot = 0.0127 \pm 0.0004$, He-to-C transition zone thickness of about 8 pressure scale heights, absolute luminosity $L_*/L_\odot = -1.30(\pm0.09, -0.12)$ hence a distance of $42 \pm 3$ pc, weak magnetic field of $1300 \pm 300G$, and the measurements of radial differential rotation. More recent, detailed model-fitting techniques using genetic algorithms along with improvements to the models have been successful in revealing even more information. We now have a measurement of the oxygen mass fraction in the core, which places constraints on both the nuclear burning rate $^{12}\text{C}(\alpha, \gamma)\text{O}$ and even more detailed structure information, such as the extent of the He/C envelope beneath the pure He envelope (Metcalfe et al. 2002, 2005; Metcalfe 2003). Except for one other DBV, the rest of the class have not been so forthcoming in revealing their internal structures, primarily due to their lack of the abundance of pulsation modes compared to GD 358’s over 100 detected frequencies. CBS 114 is a DBV which showed promise for successful asteroseismological analysis by exhibiting a rich pulsation spectrum, but earlier observational comparisons to the models produced a $C(\alpha, \gamma)\text{O}$ nuclear burning rate which was at odds with that obtained from GD 358 (Handler et al. 2002). After several years of additional observations of CBS 114, which lead to identifying 11 independent pulsation modes (four of which were new) along with improvements in pulsation models and fitting techniques, Metcalfe et al. (2005) have achieved new asteroseismological
results for both stars, which are now in agreement with each other. The one thing CBS 114 did not show and which GD 358 did were the many fine-structure splittings of the pulsation modes caused predominantly by stellar rotation. Our understanding of the pulsation amplitude determining mechanism on these stars is incomplete, and we cannot explain why we see significant fine-structure splitting in GD 358 but not much in CBS 114. We certainly do not believe it is due to lack of rotation on CBS 114’s part though it could be due to the star being observed near pole-on. So the search goes on for a third solvable pulsator to try and distinguish modes, models, fits, and reality in these objects.

Another important reason to study DBVs is that they are great cosmic laboratories for high-energy physics. Winget et al. (2004) predict that hot DBs should have significant plasmon neutrino production. Their DB models suggest that 30,000 K, 0.6 $M_\odot$ DBs have a neutrino luminosity that is 1.8 times higher than their photon luminosity. On the cool end, 22,000 K, 0.6 $M_\odot$ DBV models have a neutrino luminosity less than half of their photon luminosity. Thus the hottest DBVs should be losing energy and cooling significantly faster than the cooler ones. Since a pulsation mode’s period is a function of temperature, we can directly measure a star’s cooling rate by measuring a mode’s rate of period change (e.g., Kepler et al. 2005b). And thus, the DBVs may be quite revealing laboratories for neutrino physics.

Finally, an increase in the number of known DBVs will help us understand their properties as a group. Clemens (1994) and Kleinman (1995, 1998) found that the DA pulsators break down nicely into two distinct classes, each subclass exhibiting common class properties, which they have used to investigate the dynamics of the pulsation mechanism in these stars. By increasing the number of known DBVs, we can search for possible subclass distinctions. Nather et al. (1981) noted that the interacting binary WD stars will each eventually form a single DB at the end of their evolution. This means that there may be more than one evolutionary channel leading to the DBs. Perhaps we will find two distinct classes, each of them retaining the evidence of their evolutionary paths in their pulsation structures.

SDSS is a photometric and spectroscopic survey of the sky covering about 10,000 deg$^2$ around the Northern Galactic cap (York et al. 2000; Stoughton et al. 2002; Gunn et al. 1998, 2006). In SDSS’s Sixth Data Release (Adelman-McCarthy et al. 2008), there are photometry of close to 10,000 deg$^2$ in five filters (Fukugita et al. 1996) and 1.27 million spectra. Although the survey’s main goal was to produce a three-dimensional map of the large-scale structure of the universe, it also contains data on many galactic stellar objects, including WDs. SDSS data provide the perfect basis set for finding new DBVs, which will eventually help solve the DB Gap mystery, measure the neutrino production rates inside the DBs, as well as answer some other questions about the WD structure and evolution. Kleinman et al. (2004) published the first WD catalog based on the spectra obtained by SDSS and doubled the number of then known WDs. The newest WD catalog from the SDSS (Eisenstein et al. 2006b, DR4 WD catalog hereafter) has almost quadrupled the number of WDs. Among the new WDs are DBs whose physical parameters determined from model fitting suggest they are inside the instability strip. Therefore, we started a project to search for new DBVs using our spectroscopic fits to SDSS spectra, originally from Kleinman et al. (2004) and later using the DR4 WD catalog, to identify likely DBV candidates and follow them up with time-series photometry. This survey is the counterpart to the search for new SDSS DAVs reported by Mukadam et al. (2004), Mullally et al. (2005), Kepler et al. (2005a), and Castanheira et al. (2006b, 2007).

2. OBSERVATIONS

We selected our DBV candidates based on the effective temperatures published in the SDSS WD catalogs (Kleinman et al. 2004; Eisenstein et al. 2006b). As described in those works, each spectrum was fitted with Detlev Koester’s atmosphere models (Koester et al. 2001) to obtain an effective temperature and surface gravity. The DB models used in the catalogs are pure He models. Beauchamp et al. (1999) showed that the physical parameters of the model fit of DBs can change if He atmosphere models with trace amount of H are used. Since we do not know how much H, if any, our candidate SDSS DBs have, the pure He atmosphere model fits are as good as any other. The currently known coolest DBV being 21,800 K (Beauchamp et al. 1999; Castanheira et al. 2006a), we chose to select all DBs with effective temperatures higher than 21,000 K as DBV candidates. The blue edge of the instability strip is currently defined by EC 20058, the second hottest DB known (Beauchamp et al. 1999; Sullivan et al. 2008) prior to the new DBs discovered by the SDSS. The hottest DB known prior to the SDSS is PG0112+104 with $T_{\text{eff}} = 31,500$ K, which defines the cool end of the DB gap. Time-series observations of this star have not detected any pulsations (J.L. Provenca 2006, private communication). Nonetheless, given a boundary determined by only one object, we decided to place no upper limit on our candidate stars’ effective temperatures.

We observed our DBV candidates using the Argos CCD camera (Nather & Mukadam 2004) on the 2.1 m telescope at McDonald Observatory, SPICam on the 3.5 m telescope at Apache Point Observatory, and the Southern Astrophysical Research Telescope’s (SOAR) Optical Imager (SOI). More than half of the new, H atmosphere WD variables (DAVs) reported in the past few years have been discovered using Argos (Mukadam et al. 2004; Mullally et al. 2005; Castanheira et al. 2006b). We observed and reduced the data from Argos in the same manner as described in Mukadam et al. (2004) and Mullally et al. (2005). Exposure times ranged from 5 s to 30 s, depending on the brightness of the target and condition of the sky. The readout time was negligible due to the use of a frame-transfer detector. For some of the objects, we used a BG40 filter to suppress the redder portion of the flux, which is dominated by noise. After we applied bias and flat-field corrections to all CCD frames, we extracted sky-subtracted light curves via aperture photometry for the variable candidates and at least one comparison star in the field. We then divided the target star’s light curve by the sum of the comparison stars’ light curves to take out any transparency variations in the sky. We normalized the result so that the average brightness of the star is equal to 0 and the light curve shows the fractional intensity variation, and applied a barycentric correction to the times. The resulting light curves for the new DBVs are shown in the left panel of Figure 1.

SPICam was not built for fast time-series data acquisition, and therefore we binned and used partial readout to achieve a reasonable duty cycle for this project. The binning and window size of the chip depended on the seeing and field of the target since we needed at least one comparison star. Once we acquired the data, we followed a similar procedure as with Argos data to produce our light curves.

We used SOI to discover our ninth DBV. SOI has also contributed to discoveries of 18 new DAVs (Kepler et al. 2005a;
Figure 1. Light curve (the left panel) and Fourier transform (the right panel) of the nine new DBVs reported in this paper. The light curve of SDSS J140814.64+003838.9 was binned by two (i.e., changing the sampling rate from 10 s to 20 s) to show the pulsation better in the figure, but the FT was calculated from the unbinned data. SDSS J0947.49+015501.9’s FT, perhaps, is not as visually convincing as other new DBVs shown here. The FT of the second observation of this target also shows the largest peak at a consistent frequency as the data shown here with similar significance.

Castanheira et al. 2006b). It is a CCD camera with reasonably fast readout time (6.3 s). We used 30 s integration time for the data we gathered on SDSS J085202.44+213036.5. Again, we followed a similar procedure as with Argos data to produce our light curves.

Table 1 is our journal of observations. We tried to observe each object for at least 2 hr on two separate occasions. The second observation is to confirm and test the results of the first observation. As you can see from Table 1, we have been able to get the second observation for five of the new DBVs, but not for all of the objects reported in this paper. For the DBs which did not show pulsations during the first observations, additional data are still very important. The lack of variability in the first observation may simply be due to amplitude modulations or beating of closely spaced modes, which are not resolved in our ∼2 hr observations. It is also important to obtain a good amplitude limit (1 mma or smaller) to which we currently have. The amplitude limit is defined as three times the average noise between 1000 and 10,000 μHz. For equally spaced data, this limit translates into a 0.1% probability of identifying a false peak as a real one (e.g., Kepler 1993). This frequency range corresponds to periods of 100 s to 1000 s where the pulsations in DBVs have been detected. We also note that some of the light curves contain noise at low frequencies (less than few hundred μHz which corresponds to several thousand seconds and longer in period), probably due to transparency variations or thin cirrus. If we included this noise in our estimate, our amplitude limits would have been higher and not reflective of our true ability to detect variation within the frequency range of interest.

In Figure 2, we plot the effective temperatures and surface gravities for DBs in the DR4 WD catalog. Newly found DBVs, represented by large solid dots with their uncertainties in effective temperature and surface gravity, cluster around $T_{\text{eff}} \sim 25,000$ K, although many more objects still need observation (the hollow dots). We did not plot each set of error bars to avoid clutter in the figure. Many of the DBs for which we did not see any variability (represented by the squares in
Figure 2) have not been observed a second time, mainly because we have not yet had the time to do so. As can be seen from Table 1, only two objects (SDSS J090409.03+012740.9 and SDSS J141258.17+045602.2) were observed more than once with combined amplitude limits of 3.5 mmA and 2.6 mmA, respectively. These amplitude limits are by no means good enough to call them non-pulsators since some WD pulsators are known to have lower amplitudes than these. Our current results are consistent with, but do not demand, a pure DBV instability strip. We need to eventually achieve at least 1 mmA detection limit for all the DBV candidates we observe before investigating the purity of the instability strip.

We observed four DBs with $T_{\text{eff}} > 30,000$K, i.e. DBs in the "DB gap," but did not see any pulsations so far. Like the other DBs that we observed but did not detect pulsations, these objects need to be followed up before they can be declared nonpulsators. In the past, the instability strip was defined by the nine known DBVs. We have not found any pulsator hotter than EC20058 and hence the best chance of determining the neutrino production rates still lies with this star.

### 4. SUMMARY

From the DR4 WD catalog, we have about 70 DBV candidates brighter than $g = 20$ mag. To date, we have observed 29 of them and found nine new DBVs, doubling the number of known DBVs. We seek an increased number of DBVs to help us...
understand their group properties, better determine the location of the instability strip, and perhaps find hot DBVs that we can use to measure their cooling rates and place a limit on the neutrino production rate in their interiors. Based on these statistics, we can expect at least another 12 new DBVs from the DR4 sample and 20 more from the DR6. These are probably lower limits though, since we suspect that additional observations of our 29 currently observed objects will probably reveal new low-amplitude pulsators as well.

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Table 3

| Object SDSS J | Plate | Fiber | MJD | g (mag) | $T_{\text{eff}}$ (K) | $\sigma_{T_{\text{eff}}}$ (K) | log g | $\sigma_{\log g}$ | Status |
|--------------|-------|-------|-----|--------|----------------|-----------------|-------|----------------|--------|
| 034153.03–054905.8 | 462 | 506 | 51909 | 18.25 | 25087 | 524 | 8.02 | 0.062 | DBV |
| 085202.44+213036.5 | 2280 | 604 | 53680 | 18.50 | 25846 | 636 | 8.02 | 0.056 | DBV |
| 094749.40+015501.8 | 480 | 520 | 51989 | 19.95 | 23453 | 1659 | 8.13 | 0.192 | DBV |
| 104318.45+415412.5 | 1361 | 155 | 53047 | 18.95 | 26291 | 919 | 7.77 | 0.138 | DBV(1) |
| 122314.25+435009.1 | 1371 | 205 | 52821 | 18.98 | 23442 | 1069 | 7.84 | 0.127 | DBV |
| 125759.03–021313.3 | 338 | 436 | 51694 | 19.16 | 25820 | 1296 | 7.57 | 0.151 | DBV |
| 130516.51+045640.8 | 1458 | 21 | 53119 | 17.46 | 24080 | 414 | 8.14 | 0.056 | DBV(1) |
| 130742.43+622955.6 | 783 | 513 | 52325 | 18.83 | 23841 | 913 | 8.14 | 0.097 | DBV(1) |
| 140814.63+033839.8 | 302 | 490 | 51688 | 19.19 | 26073 | 1227 | 7.98 | 0.117 | DBV |
| 001529.74+010521.3 | 389 | 530 | 51795 | 18.94 | 34379 | 1079 | 7.96 | 0.163 | 8.20(1) |
| 013609.12–062556.8 | 459 | 605 | 51924 | 19.97 | 24478 | 2520 | 7.96 | 0.222 | 17.0(1) |
| 081904.19+354255.8 | 826 | 422 | 52295 | 18.22 | 22540 | 867 | 8.18 | 0.079 | 4.80(1) |
| 085950.29–000339.6 | 469 | 49 | 51913 | 20.19 | 23729 | 2391 | 8.12 | 0.291 | 13.3(1) |
| 090409.03+012740.9 | 470 | 442 | 51929 | 17.96 | 23183 | 533 | 7.95 | 0.062 | 4.28 |
| 090456.11+525029.8 | 552 | 547 | 51992 | 18.95 | 37584 | 953 | 7.99 | 0.091 | 10.1(1) |
| 092200.97+000834.3 | 474 | 388 | 52000 | 18.56 | 22581 | 769 | 8.10 | 0.074 | 7.56(1) |
| 095256.68+135610.32 | 1356 | 21 | 53119 | 17.46 | 24080 | 414 | 8.14 | 0.056 | DBV(1) |
| 095455.11+405640.8 | 1458 | 21 | 53119 | 17.46 | 24080 | 414 | 8.14 | 0.056 | DBV(1) |

Notes. The top section of the table details the objects that showed variability during at least one observation. Separated by a double horizontal line, the second half of the table lists the objects for which we have not (yet?) seen significant variability. In the status section, we note new variable objects by “DBV” For objects in which we have not detected variability, we give the amplitude limit in mm in the status section. If we have observed an object only once, then we add a “(1).” Due to lack of observing time and a large number of candidates, we have not yet been able to observe all DBV candidate objects, nor all these a second time. The physical parameters here come from fitting SDSS DR4 spectral data with a denser, but otherwise consistent, model grid than that used in the DR4 WD catalog.
