

Snowmass2021 - Letter of Interest

Insights for Fundamental Physics and Cosmology with Light Relics

Thematic Areas:

- (CF1) Dark Matter: Particle Like
- (CF2) Dark Matter: Wavelike
- (CF3) Dark Matter: Cosmic Probes
- (CF4) Dark Energy and Cosmic Acceleration: The Modern Universe
- (CF5) Dark Energy and Cosmic Acceleration: Cosmic Dawn and Before
- (CF6) Dark Energy and Cosmic Acceleration: Complementarity of Probes and New Facilities
- (CF7) Cosmic Probes of Fundamental Physics
- (TF9) Astro-particle physics & cosmology
- (NF2) Sterile Neutrinos
- (NF3) BSM

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Abstract:

The extremely hot and dense environment of the early Universe provides the conditions that lead to the production of the fundamental ingredients of our Universe, even those which are very weakly coupled to Standard Model states. Long-lived species produced during this phase of expansion affect the evolution of the Universe, leaving imprints in many cosmological observables. The insight offered by cosmology into light relic particles is particularly valuable, given the challenges in detecting such species by other means. The gravitational effects of any light relics can be observed through their unique imprint in the cosmic microwave background, the large-scale structure, and the primordial light element abundances, and are important in determining the initial conditions of the Universe. Future cosmological observations can be orders of magnitude more sensitive than current experiments. These observations offer a unique and broad discovery space for new physics in the dark sector and beyond. A detection of an excess light relic abundance would be a clear indication of new physics and would provide the first direct information about the hot Universe prior to neutrino decoupling. The absence of a signal places powerful constraints on dark sectors competitive with experimental and astrophysical probes.

Cosmic Neutrinos: The cosmic neutrino background provides a useful example of the physics of cosmological light relics and the insights provided by cosmological measurements of the light relic density. In the very early Universe, neutrinos were kept in thermal equilibrium with the Standard Model plasma until the temperature dropped below about 1 MeV and neutrinos decoupled from the plasma. The background of cosmic neutrinos persists today, with a temperature and number density similar to that of the cosmic microwave background (CMB). The cosmic neutrino energy density ρ_ν can be expressed in terms of the effective number of neutrino species, $N_{\text{eff}} = \frac{8}{7} \left(\frac{11}{4}\right)^{4/3} \frac{\rho_\nu}{\rho_\gamma}$, where ρ_γ is the energy density in photons. Detailed calculations of neutrino decoupling predict that in the Standard Model $N_{\text{eff}}^{\text{SM}} = 3.045^{1-3}$.

Cosmology is sensitive to the gravitational effects of neutrinos (and all light relics), both through their mean energy density⁴⁻⁷ and their fluctuations, which propagate at the speed of light in the early universe due to the free-streaming nature of neutrinos⁷⁻¹⁰. A radiation fluid whose fluctuations do not exceed the sound speed of the plasma^{11,12} could arise from large neutrino self-interactions^{13,14}, neutrino-dark sector interactions, or dark radiation self-coupling. Such a radiation fluid can be observationally distinguished from free-streaming radiation, providing a test of new physics in the neutrino and dark sectors^{9,15,16}.

New Light States: A measurement of the value of N_{eff} provides vastly more information than just the energy density in cosmic neutrinos. The parameter N_{eff} is a probe of any particles that have the same gravitational influence as relativistic neutrinos, which is true of any (free-streaming) radiation. Furthermore, this radiation could have been created at much earlier times when the energy densities were even higher than in the cores of stars or supernovae, shedding light on the physics at new extremes of temperature and density, and providing further insight into our early cosmic history.

New sources of (dark) radiation are well motivated by both particle physics and cosmology¹⁷⁻¹⁹. New light particles are predicted in many extensions of the Standard Model, including axions and sterile neutrinos, or can arise as a consequence of solving the hierarchy problem¹⁷⁻³⁸. For large regions of unexplored parameter space, these light particles are thermalized in the early universe and lead to additional radiation at later times. Light species are ubiquitous in models of the late universe as well: they may form the dark matter (e.g. axions), be an essential ingredient of a more complicated dark sector as the force carrier between dark matter and the Standard Model (or itself), or provide a source of dark radiation for a dark thermal history. Furthermore, these new particles could also play a role in explaining discrepancies in the measurements of the Hubble constant H_0 ³⁹⁻⁴³, the amplitude of large-scale matter fluctuations σ_8 ⁴⁴⁻⁴⁷, and the properties of clustering on small scales^{48,49}. Measuring the total radiation density is a broad window into all these possibilities as well as additional scenarios that we have yet to consider⁵⁰.

The contribution to N_{eff} from any thermal light relic is easy to predict because its energy density in equilibrium is fixed by the temperature and the number of internal states (e.g. spin configurations). Under mild assumptions⁵¹, the contribution to ΔN_{eff} is determined by two numbers, the last temperature at which it was in equilibrium, T_F , and the effective number of spin degrees of freedom, g_s , according to $\Delta N_{\text{eff}} = g_s \left(\frac{43/4}{g_*(T_F)}\right)^{4/3}$. The function $g_*(T_F)$ is the number of effective degrees of freedom (defined as the number of independent states with an additional factor of 7/8 for fermions) present in the thermal plasma at the temperature T_F and accounts for how much the photons are heated by the annihilation of heavy states after the decoupling of the new species. The next generation of CMB observations are expected to reach a precision of $\sigma(N_{\text{eff}}) = 0.03$ ⁵²⁻⁵⁴, which would extend our reach in T_F by several orders of magnitude for a particle with spin $s > 0$ and be the first measurement sensitive to a real scalar ($s = 0$) that decouples prior to the QCD phase transition.

The impact of the coming generation of observations is illustrated in Fig. 1. The anticipated improvements in measurements of N_{eff} translate into orders of magnitude in sensitivity to the temperature T_F . This temperature sets the reach in probing fundamental physics. Even in the absence of a detection, future cos-

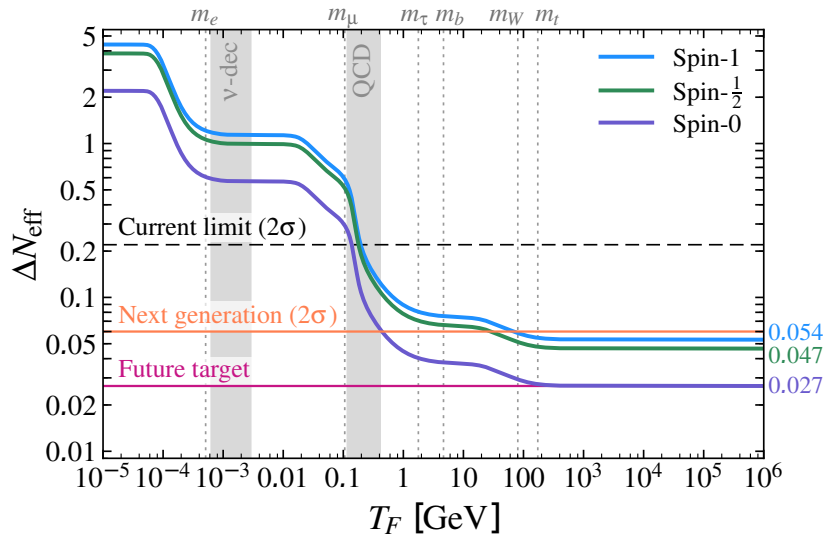


Figure 1: Contributions of a single massless particle, which decoupled at the temperature T_F from the Standard Model, to the effective number of relativistic species, $N_{\text{eff}} = N_{\text{eff}}^{\text{SM}} + \Delta N_{\text{eff}}$, with the Standard Model expectation $N_{\text{eff}}^{\text{SM}} = 3.045$ from neutrinos. The limit at 95% c.l. from current observations⁴⁹, and the anticipated sensitivity of next-generation CMB experiments^{52–55} illustrate the power of cosmological surveys to constrain light thermal relics. The displayed values on the right are the observational thresholds for particles with different spins and arbitrarily large decoupling temperature, and provide particularly compelling targets for future observations^{56–59}. Figure reproduced from Ref. 50.

mological probes would place constraints that can be orders of magnitude stronger than current probes of the same physics, including for axion-like particles³⁴ and dark sectors^{37,38,60,61}. These contributions to N_{eff} asymptote to specific values of $\Delta N_{\text{eff}} = 0.027, 0.047, 0.054$ for a massless (real) spin-0 scalar, spin-1/2 (Weyl) fermion and spin-1 vector boson, respectively (see Fig. 1). A cosmological probe with sensitivity to ΔN_{eff} at these levels would probe physics back to the time of reheating for even a single additional species. These thresholds are within reach of some proposed CMB⁵⁶ and 21 cm experiments^{57,58}.

Gravitational Waves: Even without new light particles, N_{eff} is a probe of new physics that changes our thermal history, including processes that result in a stochastic background of gravitational waves^{62–64}. Violent phase transitions and other nonlinear dynamics in the primordial universe could produce such a background, peaked at frequencies much larger than those accessible to B-mode polarization measurements of the CMB or, in many cases, direct detection experiments such as LIGO and LISA^{65–69}. For particularly violent sources, the energy density in gravitational waves can be large enough to make a measurable contribution to N_{eff} ^{69–71}.

Observables: The effect of the radiation density on the damping tail of the anisotropy power spectrum drives the constraint on N_{eff} from the CMB. High-resolution maps of the CMB are expected to provide a measurement of $\sigma(N_{\text{eff}}) = 0.03$ in the coming decade^{52–54} and future surveys such as CMB-HD are expected to reach $\sigma(N_{\text{eff}}) = 0.014$ ⁵⁶. Measurements of the primordial abundances of light elements can also be used to infer the relic density of neutrinos and other light species, with deuterium⁷² and helium-4^{73,74} currently providing the tightest constraints. These measurements are expected to provide useful complementarity with CMB measurements^{75–78} but are not expected to drive improvements on N_{eff} constraints on their own⁷⁹. Maps of the large-scale structure of the Universe from galaxy and weak lensing surveys can provide complementary measurements of the radiation content^{55,57,80}. A future 21 cm intensity mapping experiment like PUMA⁵⁸, in conjunction with CMB-S4, could improve constraints to $\sigma(N_{\text{eff}}) = 0.013$ ⁵⁷, providing extremely broad insight into physics beyond the Standard Model.

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