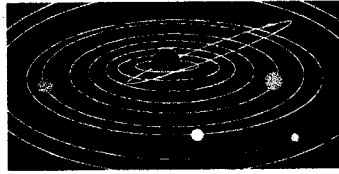


THE FLINT RIVER OBSERVER



Vol. 3, No. 8

FLINT RIVER ASTRONOMY CLUB

October, 1999

Officers: President, **Steven (Smitty) Smith** (583-2200); Vice President/newsletter editor, **Bill Warren** (229-6108 -- or, if you prefer e-mail: warren1212@mindspring.com); Secretary-Treasurer, **Ken Walburn** (P. O. Box 1179, McDonough, GA 30253 / 954-9442; AlCor, **Neal Wellons**, and Web Site Coordinator, **Cody Wellons** (946-5039); Librarians, **Tom and Katie Moore** (228-6447); Telephone/Hospitality Committee Chairman: **Dan Pillatzki** (707-0270). Club mailing address: 1212 Everee Inn Road, Griffin, GA 30224. All of these phone numbers have 770 area code prefixes. FRAC web page address: <http://welcome.to/frac>.

Please notify **Bill Warren** promptly if you have a change of address or e-mail.

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Club Calendar. Thurs., Oct. 7: FRAC meeting (BB media center, 7:30); **Fri.-Sat., Oct. 8-9:** club deep-sky observings (Cox Field at dark); **Fri., Oct. 22:** Beaverbrook PTA Chicken-Que observing, at dark.

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President's Message. First, let me welcome (and introduce) FRAC's newest members, 13-year-old **Michael Chappell** and his brother **David**, of Covington. Michael and David are nephews of **Steve & Dawn Knight**.

Second, in case you haven't been out to Cox Field since last month you should know that the new green-and-white street sign at the intersection of Turner Rd. and Hwy. 362 is missing. Our FRAC sign is still there, though.

Now. To all members of FRAC, I welcome you to the beginning of the "real" observing

season(s). You newcomers and any others who haven't noticed it yet, go outside on a cloudless night and make an observation of the heavens in general. See? I told you the hazy sky due to the moisture in the air during the spring and summer months would finally leave us. The sky is looking clearer and sharper as the days go by!

And I'll say it again: *Write Down Your Observations!!!* It only takes a few minutes to log an observation

Let me reiterate that, as members of FRAC, we are also members of the Astronomical League which has more than a dozen different observing programs in which you can take part. You need not work on only one until finished and then start on another, you are free to work on several at the same time. Standardized observing forms are available for all programs.

For those starting out in astronomy I recommend (in no particular order) the **Messier, Binocular Messier, Lunar and Meteor** observing programs. You don't need a big "light bucket" telescope for the Messier or Lunar programs; a 3"-4" aperture will do. You don't need \$150 binoculars for the Binocular Messiers, either: I did mine with a 30-year-old pair of cheap Tasco 10x40s (although I do recommend that you use 7x50 or 10x50 binocs, they make it much easier). For the Meteor program, all you need are your trusty 1x magnification eyeballs, an observing sheet and pencil, and the inner will to look only in one direction at any part of the sky you wish for an hour at a time. A nice comfortable chair or recliner helps with this one, but your observations won't count if you are heard snoring.

I also recommend that you purchase the *ALPO Guide to Watching Meteors* from AL

(cheap at \$3 + \$1 postage) as this resource explains how how meteor watching is done. Your observations can be useful to professional astronomers.

The most recent AL observing certificates awarded in the programs I mentioned were Messier #1675, Binocular Messier #383, Lunar #179, and Meteor #13.

At last count, the AL boasted 15,000 members; does this mean that these observing programs are too hard for most people? Absolutely not. Most of those 15,000 members are amateur astronomers just like you and me who are out under the night sky observing what they can find. And most of those 15,000 are not recording their observations, either!

I think you'll agree that it's nice to be recognized for your efforts when you work on something, especially if it's something you enjoyed doing. It's also nice to have something tangible, a physical memento from the universe that you explored. When you complete an observing program your name will be recorded forever in the AL's history books with your certificate number. Your certificate and pin will verify to family and friends that you are an astronomer with a reason and purpose for observing, and that you searched, found and observed. Inside yourself you will feel that you are much more than (as your neighbors probably refer to you) "that nut down the street who looks at the stars."

Until next month, then, "M31 off the port bow and full speed ahead, **Mrs. (Dawn) Knight!**"

-Steven (Saratoga Smitty) Smith

(Editor's Note: Besides the clubs that Smitty listed, the AL has ten other observing programs, including: the Asteroid Club; the Arp Peculiar Galaxies Club; the Deep-Sky Binocular Club; the Double Star Club; the Herschel 400 Club; the Herschel II Club; the Planetary Club; the Southern Skies Binocular Club; the SunSpotters Club; and the Urban Club. You can get information on any or all of them by writing to the Astronomical League at the addresses listed in the awards section of

The Reflector, *their quarterly newsletter.*)

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To consider the Earth as the only populated world in infinite space is as absurd as to assert that in an entire field of millet, only one grain will grow.

-Metrodorus of Chios (4th cent. b.c.)

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Last Month's Meetings/Activities. Fifteen members attended our Sept. meeting, which, due to a mixup of sorts, featured a videotape about Jupiter. **Dan Pillatzki** provided the door prize, two spiral-bound notebooks of photos of supernovas.

Ten of us attended FRAC's Sept. deep-sky observings at Cox Field: **Joe Auriemma, Mike Stuart, Charles & Bert Sykes and John Wallace** on Fri. night, **Smitty, Dawn & Steve Knight**, and **David Ward** on Sat. night; and **yr. indefatigable reporter** on both nights.

Due to an early publication schedule, we weren't able to mention it in the *Observer* last month but we tried again on Aug. 20th to hold a public observing at Fortson Public Library in Hampton. Unruly skies kept most of last year's huge crowd away, but those who attended **Dr. Richard Schmude's** fascinating indoor presentation on meteors received souvenir packets of meteorite particles. No matter how long you've been in astronomy, it's always mind-boggling to inspect at close range something that came from outer space -- and *No*, we're not referring to **Steve Knight!**

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I would rather be a meteor, every atom of me in magnificent glow, than a sleepy and permanent planet.

-Jack London (1876-1916)

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Membership Renewals Due in October:

Chris & Royal Dowdy; and Joe & Cody Hinton. Send your \$10 check to Ken Walburn at the address listed on p. 1.

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There is no light in earth of heaven,
But the cold light of stars;
And the first watch of night is given
To the red planet Mars.

-Henry Wadsworth Longfellow

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Upcoming Meetings/Activities. October will be a jumbled-up month for FRAC, so pay attention and **mark down these dates on your calendar:**

***Thurs., Oct. 7th:** Our monthly FRAC meeting in the Beaverbrook media center at 7:30. We'll see the Percival Lowell/Clyde Tombaugh/Lowell Observatory video that we were supposed to show in Sept.;

***Fri.-Sat., Oct. 8th-9th:** Our regular Cox Field deep-sky observings. The new moon will fall on the 9th, so both nights will be excellent for observing -- if, that is, whoever runs your household will let you out for 2-3 nights in the same week. (And, we should add, if nobody buys new equipment or accessories to attract clouds. **Smitty** just bought a hardbound set of *Burnham's Celestial Handbook*, but that should bring at most a dissatisfied rumble of distant thunder and a puffy little cloudlet or two. The night sky doesn't mind your buying books, as long as you don't plan to use them in observing (i.e., *Seasonal Star charts*, *Cambridge Star Atlas*, *Sky Atlas 2000*, or *Uranometria*).

***Fri., Oct. 22nd:** We're holding a public observing at Beaverbrook in conjunction with their annual PTA-sponsored ChickenQue. Let me know if you want to come early for a complimentary chicken plate at 6:30; otherwise, plan to meet in front of the gym sometime before dark.

Don't forget about those dates, or you may do like one of our members did last month and

show up at BB or Cox Field a week late for our club meeting or observings. Still, we shouldn't be too hard on him, because it's hard to remember exact dates when you're vacationing in Florida and recuperating from jellyfish stings. Anyway, you know what they say: when you start that long downhill slide toward senility, memory is the second thing to go. (By next April, **Dan** will be able to hide his own Easter eggs.)

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The treasures hidden in the heavens are so rich that the human mind shall never be lacking in fresh nourishment.

-Johannes Kepler (1571-1630)

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The Sky in October. **Mars** (mag. 0.6) will be in *Sagittarius* during the last half of October. Look for it near **M8 (Lagoon Nebula)** on **Oct. 18th.** **Jupiter** will rise shortly after sundown and be up all night, shining about as large (50" arc) and bright (mag. -2.9) as it ever gets. **Saturn** (mag. -0.1) will trail Jupiter by about 40 min. and 15° -- an index finger-to-pinky width held at arm's length against the sky; its rings will be tilted favorably to render our view of them majestic.

Green **Uranus** will still be less than 1° -- a pinky-width against the sky at arm's length -- from **Theta (Θ) Capricorni**, as it was in Sept.; at mag. 5.8, Uranus will be an easy target for any telescope. To find Theta Cap, think of the constellation as a valentine: 4th-mag. Theta will be the naked-eye star at the upper junction of where the two halves of the heart meet.

Blue **Neptune** (mag. 7.9) will be easier to find this month than last, located about 1° W and a bit S of 5th-mag. **Sigma (ς) Capricorni** along the valentine's lower right border. *Sky & Tel's* Oct., '99 issue contains finder charts for Mars, Uranus and Neptune on p. 109.

Venus (mag. -4.5) will be a spectacularly bright morning star in October, showing a

crescent phase early in the month and a half-lighted phase later on.

A meteor shower, the **Orionids**, can be observed before dawn on the mornings of **Oct. 20th-23rd**; just look toward **Beetlejuice** in *Orion* in the E, and if the sky is clear you may see as many as 15 Orionids meteors per hour if the Moon and cloud conditions will cooperate. (There's a full moon on the 24th.)

The *real* biggie, though, will be the November **Leonids meteor shower** (more about it in next month's *Observer*). Start preparing your schedule around it now -- the Leonids will peak sometime between **Tues.-Thurs., Nov. 16th-18th**, in the early morning hours before dawn. The 1st-quarter moon will be mostly gone by then, so however disappointing this supershower was for you last year it could be incredible this time around.

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Someday I'd like to stand on the Moon, look down through a quarter of a million miles of space and say, "There certainly is a beautiful Earth out tonight!"

-Lt. Col. William H. Rankin

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Orion Telescopes: Selling Us Short

opinion by Bill Warren

Smaller certainly isn't better when it comes to seeing into the depths of the universe in a telescope. For the folks at Orion Telescopes and Binoculars, though, it apparently brings in the Big Buck\$\$\$ to sell things that way.

As of its Fall-Winter '99 catalog, Orion has discontinued its excellent Deep Space Explorer series of 6", 8", 10" and 12-1/2" Dobsonians in favor of their new Skyquest XT6 and XT8 models -- which is fine if that's what you want but not so fine if you were entertaining notions of Santa leaving a 10" or 12-1/2" Dob under the tree on Christmas morning. **Smitty** notes that Orion isn't even selling the 10" or 12-1/2" mirrors any more.

If you want to buy a telescope with an aperture of 10" or larger from the Orion catalog, you'd better be prepared to fork over \$3399 for a Celestron 11" Schmidt-Cassegrain model, or \$5899 for a 14" Celestron S-C.

For the indiscriminating (i.e., sky-ignorant) buyer who is looking for ways to fill unused attic or garage space with unused telescopes, on the other hand, Orion offers no less than eighteen models with apertures of 4.7" or less. I'm sure that most of them are fine 'scopes -- but I'm equally sure that they will dramatically re-define whatever you previously thought the term "faint and fuzzy" meant when applied to deep-sky objects. (**Smitty's** statement that all 110 Messiers can be found in a 3" telescope notwithstanding, after 2-1/2 years of searching I had found only 32 of them with my 3-1/2" Meade 390 altazimuth refractor.)

Did Tasco buy out Orion when we weren't looking?

In line with Orion's new "smaller is better because you can afford it even if you can't use it" policy, **Dan Pillatzki** points out, Orion is no longer selling Telrads. They do, however, still sell the BB gun finder scopes that work so nicely on 2-1/2" telescopes.

Smitty advises me that the following 10" Dobs are still available from other manufacturers: the Odyssey 10 from Coulter, \$550; the Discovery 10 (presumably from Discovery, \$530; the Starfinder 10 from Meade, \$600; the Compact 10 from Starsplitter, \$1,200-\$1,500; and the Tube 10 from Starsplitter, \$900 (plate glass mirror), \$1,000-\$1,300 (Pyrex mirror).

Aren't you glad you already have your 10" DSE, **Katie**?

To return to an earlier point: I'm not saying that the 4-1/2" telescope you may already have is inferior; the fact that you're a member of this club shows that you're more than a casual observer who purchased your 'scope because it looked nice in a store window. With sufficient practice, you should do very nicely with a quality 'scope of less than 5" aperture. But the fact remains: if you ever want to take a significant step up in aperture to play ball with the big boys, you won't do it with an Orion telescope unless you're as good at observing as

John Wallace, who squeezes every available photon of light out of his 8" aperture. And even then, as John will tell you, it ain't always easy.

As you probably know, I have a 10" Orion DSE; I've also spent a lot of money on products from the Orion catalog. No more, though. They've sold us -- their repeat customers -- out to pursue unsuspecting one-time customers who don't understand the limitations of what they're buying. And *Yes*, I'm overreacting -- but as the guy in the movie *Network* shouted, "I'm mad as (Hades) and I'm not gonna take it anymore!" I will NOT buy anything else from Orion in the future, not ever, and I strongly urge that you do likewise.

I mean, it's not like Orion is the only firm selling telescopes and accessories; they've just been easier to buy from because we get their catalogs so often in the mail.

Instead of subsidizing Orion's effort to downsize apertures because the larger ones tend to cost a bit more, I'll buy my stuff from other sources I find in *Astronomy* and *Sky & Tel*.

One other thing courtesy of **Smitty**: if your 98-year-old Aunt Hagatha finally departs this good earth and her will leaves you untold wealth to spend as you see fit so long as you keep her 900 cats healthy, you can buy a 40" Starsplitter II Ultimate 40 (truss tube) Dobsonian 'scope for only \$36,000 (tax, shipping and handling not included). The down sides of it are that it will take 30-52 weeks to deliver, and about as long to set up every time you bring it to Cox Field. Mr. Cox probably won't like it when he sees 900 cats on his runway, either.

As long as we're fantasizing about frittering away fabulous fortunes, we may as well go all the way. Here's an ad that appears in the Oct. '99 issue of *Sky & Tel*: "LARGE CERVIT MIRROR BLANK. 73-inch diameter, 12-inch thick (cored), unfinished blank. Includes 50% complete polishing machine. \$100,000 or best offer. For details and photos see <http://www.noiseland.com/wmv.html>."

One can only wonder how much they would be asking for it if that polishing machine were

complete!

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The stars are the jewels of the night, and perchance surpass anything which day has to show.

-Henry David Thoreau (1817-1862)

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The Lunatix Challenge Series: #8

by Philip Sacco (Lunatic #82)

(Editor's Note: This is the 8th in a series of 12 monthly "Challenges" devised by AAC's Phil Sacco to make your Lunar Club award quest more interesting. Remember: If you miss a given feature one month, you can always look for it next month; and you can look for naked eye or binocular targets with a telescope or binoculars if you prefer to do so.)

Naked-Eye Targets. 1. How did the Bay of Rainbows become a bay? 2. What is considered to be the first large impact basin on the earth side of the Moon? 3. Name the two youngest large, prominent craters on the Moon.

Pickering's Naked-Eye Challenge. Can you see the slightly shaded area near the walled plain *Sacrobosco*? (This is a rated 10 to 12 challenge...)

Binocular Targets. 1. Crater *Piccolomini*. 2. Crater *Cassini*. 3. Crater *Autolycus*. 4. Crater *Albategnius*. 5. Crater *Mitchell*.

Telescopic Targets. 1. Craters *Hesiodus* and *Hesiodus A*: What is unique about these two craters? 2. Crater *Regiomontanus*: What is unique about its central peak? 3. Crater *Timocharis*: What happened to the central peak in this crater? 4. (Challenge) Crater *Wargentin*: What makes this crater different from most other craters on the Moon?

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