

THE FLINT RIVER OBSERVER

Newsletter of the Flint River Astronomy Club
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Club Calendar. Fri.-Sat., Jan. 31-Feb. 1: Cox Field observings, at dark; **Thurs., Feb. 13:** FRAC meeting (Beaverbrook, 7:30); **Thurs., Feb. 27:** Cowan Road Elementary School observing (behind the school, at dark); **Fri.-Sat., Feb. 28-Mar. 1:** Cox Field observings, at dark.

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Vice President's Message. As my time as an officer in FRAC winds down, I'd like to thank everyone for your support and friendship during the past six years.

I've thoroughly enjoyed the pleasure of your company, and I hope the feeling is mutual. I appreciate each of you more than you'll ever know. You've consistently managed to overlook the many mistakes I've made, both in print and in person at 170 decibels. You've smiled at my weak attempts at humor, even when it was directed at you rather than at myself. You've been there for me when I needed you. And in a thousand tiny ways you've let me know that the club I co-founded is important to you; what more could anyone ask for in the way of friends?

We've come a long way in a short time, and I'm proud of the progress we've made. We're a small club, but our reputation and influence in the amateur astronomy community continues to grow. With two Master Observers, a former Horkheimer Award winner and numerous articles appearing in national magazines from present and former members, FRAC has established a tradition of excellence that extends far beyond the confines of our service area in middle Georgia.

That trend currently extends into the area of technology, as witness the remarkable recent achievements of **Steve Knight, Doug Maxwell, David & Brendon O'Keeffe, Larry Fallin, Jerry Williams** and others in building or customizing their telescopes. And who could have predicted six years ago that we'd be sending out our newsletters via computer, or that we'd enjoy tax-exempt status, have an ever-expanding web site and a discussion group, or even consider putting on a star party of our own? I'm proud of all those things, and you should be too.

Still, in the final analysis the single factor that makes FRAC special is, and always has been, the fact that *our members genuinely like each other, and enjoy each other's company*. From oldsters like me to youngsters like **Cory Dukes**, from seasoned veterans to rank beginners, it is our caring that sets us apart and shines like a (red light) beacon at our observings and meetings. There are no cliques or "in" groups in FRAC, and no know-it-all members (except me and **Bill Snyder**, and we don't count because (a) we're both about $\frac{3}{4}$ senile, and (b) the only people we argue with are each other). We park in an "L" or a "U" shape at Cox Field to ensure that everyone is included in the group, and in six years I have yet to find even

one FRAC member at any club observing who has been unwilling to help someone else in any way possible. Not every club can make such boasts, but in our case it's true. *We care.* If you're a newcomer to FRAC, give us the opportunity and we'll show you the truth of that statement.

Our leadership is on solid ground. Like the biblical Moses, two years ago **Steve Knight** didn't consider himself leadership material in such a difficult area as astronomy – but look how far he's brought us in the short span of one year! Steve has learned (as I learned years earlier) that the most serious mistake a leader can make is being afraid to try new paths for fear of making mistakes. If I didn't think FRAC is on solid footing, I wouldn't be stepping down now. I've invested six years of my life in FRAC, but I honestly believe with all my heart that the best is yet to come.

-Bill Warren

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Last Month's Meeting/Activities. The late Dec. observings were washouts, as was Fri., Jan. 3rd. The morning of Sat., Jan. 4th was better, though, as you'll see from the following message from **David O'Keeffe**: "Y'all should have been there! **Brendon** and I arrived at Cox Field at 3 a.m. The clouds were just clearing. Within an hour the sky was crystal clear. Seeing was average. We counted about 65-70 **Quadrantids** meteors between 3 a.m. and dawn (when we weren't looking in the eyepiece, that is). The peak came as we arrived, or just before then. There were some bolides with nice vapor trails, some of them rivaling the Leonids.

"**Comet Kudo-Fujikawa** was very nice. The tail wasn't visible. It had a well-defined nucleus of about mag. 7. During an hour of watching we saw the comet slowly drift across the background of faint stars at high magnification, until first light cut the comet-watching short.

"We also saw **Saturn** in front of the **Crab Nebula**. Looking at it dead on, the nebula wasn't visible, you had to put Saturn just out of the field of view in order to see the Crab's faint edges.

"We also looked at several galaxies in *Ursa Major*. We wanted to look up more, but ran out of time. All in all, it was one exciting morning!"

The sky remained clear that evening (Sat. night), and 18 members showed up at Cox Field: **Jerry Williams, Irene & Curt Cole, yr. editor, David & Brendon O'Keeffe, Cory & Grady Dukes, Dawn & Steve Knight, Doug Maxwell, Smitty, Joe Auriemma** and **Mary, Terry, Michael, Laura & John Parks**. **Grady** announced that he recently completed his Binocular Messier observings.

Nineteen members and guests showed up for our Jan. meeting at Beaverbrook: **Greg Potter, Katie & Tom Moore, Larry Fallin, Bill Snyder, Irene & Curt Cole, Felix Luciano, John Wallace, Dawn & Steve Knight, Doug Maxwell, David Ward, Smitty, Terry Parks, Erik Erikson, Tracy & Haley Chambers** and **yr. editor**. We watched the first half of **Felix's** new videotape, "Observatories: Stonehenge to the Hubble Telescope," and **Steve** talked about the improvements he's made on his telescope, which used to be known as "Big Boy" but now answers to the more imposing name of "**Frankenscope**". That telescope has undergone more changes than the Georgia state flag. (There's absolutely no truth to the rumor that Steve's next project will be to equip the Frankenscope with a coffee maker, soft drink dispenser and popcorn machine – although a Mr. Coffee attachment would hit the spot on some of these frigid winter evenings we've been having!)

The following evening, **John Wallace, Doug Maxwell, Felix Luciano, Greg Potter** and **yr. editor** showed about 30 excited Beaverbrook students and their parents **Saturn** and a surprisingly large number of deep-sky wonders despite the presence of a Moon that was one day past First Quarter. **Steve, Dawn** and **Roman Mierbeth** came a bit later, and Roman used the 6" reflector that **Doug** had brought along with his 14" Dob for that very purpose. It was a thoughtful act on Doug's part, and offered one more proof of what we always tell visitors and newcomers: *We'll try real hard to see that you enjoy your time spent with us.*

At any rate, February brought us several faces that we hadn't seen nearly enough of recently – **Jerry Williams, Cory & Grady Dukes, Joe Auriemma,**

Terry Parks, Greg Potter and Katie Moore (on temporary loan from the Univ. of Arizona); their presence brought the warmth of friendships renewed, and reminded us of how fortunate we've been along the way.

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Membership Renewals Due in February: Scott & Alise Hammonds; Felix Luciano; and Greg Potter. Please send your check for \$12 payable to either Steve Knight or FRAC c/o Steve's address listed in the upper left hand portion of p. 1.

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Upcoming Meetings/Activities. We start the month with Cox Field observings on **Fri.-Sat., Jan. 31st-Feb. 1st** (with the new moon on the 1st).

Our club meeting will be at 7:30 at Beaverbrook on **Thurs., Feb. 13th**. In addition to electing officers for the next year, we'll see the rest of Felix's "Observatories" tape. And as you'll see in the "This 'n That" section, we'll have a very special door prize that you **won't** want to miss.

We're skipping the BB observing in Feb. in order to give **Jupiter** a bit more time to rise above the treeline to the E, but on **Thurs., Feb. 27th**, we'll conduct a public observing at **Cowan Road Elementary School** in Griffin. The observing will begin at dark, and if the weather is poor we'll go indoors to talk about astronomy and show the folks how telescopes work. We hope you'll join us on that evening.

To get to the school from, say, Jonesboro, come S toward Griffin on U. S. Hwy. 19/41, past Birdie Road and through the next stoplight, and after you pass Hardee's and McDonald's on the right, turn right at the stoplight at McIntosh Road (Ga. Hwy. 92 to Fayetteville). About a mile out Hwy. 92, turn right at the Cowan Road stoplight. The first school you'll pass on the left is Cowan Road Middle School; almost immediately beyond it is the elementary school. Since we'll set up behind the school, go past it, bump up the curb, drive around back and look for where we're set up.

We'll close the month with Cox Field observings on **Fri.-Sat., Feb. 28th-Mar. 1st**; the new moon will be on the 3rd.

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This 'n That. If you need a good reason to attend our February meeting at BB, here's one: our door prize will be the *Sky Map Pro 8 CD*, valued at more than \$100, that **David Ward** donated as a door prize and **yr. editor** won at the Dec. party. (There's nothing wrong with the software; it simply needs to be in the possession of someone who is capable of putting it to good use.)

*We recently received an interesting e-mail from an ex-member, **Robert Hall** of Warner Robins. Robert wrote, "For Christmas, my brother gave me a 2" Broadband Light Pollution (nebula) filter from Orion Telescopes and Binocular Center. When the package came, it had a new catalog with it, of course. I went to their website to check out the Year End Sale that was going on.

"Some 80-90 items were on sale, and more than 2 dozen of them had a cost of \$0.00. You read it right: items that were \$xx.xx (the original price) were being listed at \$0.00. I entered two items into the shopping cart and both items said FREE GIFT. I checked out, paying \$5.95 for shipping. I received a confirmation e-mail and tracking number from FedEx about the package when it was shipped.

"Today is Jan. 9, and I just received the package with brand new items and the invoice showing my order and a charge to my credit card of just \$5.95.

"Here's where it gets really interesting: Two nights ago, there was a message on my answering machine from Orion. A cute-sounding young lady said, "There was a huge error on our web site and those items weren't supposed to be offered at zero cost. Do you still want those items at regular price?"

"This sale went on for over a week and a half, because I watched it. It looks like I got a \$119.00, 25mm Lanthanum eyepiece and a \$90.00, 2" Narrowband LPR filter for free. What do you think? -Robert."

Any comments?

*From **Larry Fallin**: “Check out the links section (of our FRAC web site). I just added a new folder called “Performance Calculators” and added two links in it that you can use to calculate various performance parameters of telescopes and eyepieces. I use the eyepiece calculator frequently to evaluate an eyepiece’s actual field of view before buying new eyepieces. Wanna know what the actual field of view will be in your telescope of that \$500, 80 degree apparent field Nagler before breaking the bank to purchase one? This is the place!”

*During a lull in the action at our Jan. BB observing, **Felix Luciano** found and showed us **King 14**, a small, vaguely Y-shaped open cluster near the bright star *Kappa Cas* in *Cassiopeia*; it had been pointed out in **Sue French’s** article, “Cassiopeia’s Chair,” in the Small Scopes Sampler portion of the Dec., 2002 issue of *Sky & Telescope* (p. 96). “Under Moonless nights I am able to see **NGC 146** and **NGC 133** also,” Felix added, referring to two larger but fainter open clusters that share the low-power field of view with King 14. Good work, Felix!

***Yr. editor** has a padded observing chair with a built-in Whoopee cushion: every time I sit down on it, the cushion makes an embarrassingly loud and vulgar “*Whooooohhhh!*” sound.

Larry Fallin and **Bill Snyder** have the same chair; I’d ask them if they have the same problem with theirs – but knowing them, they’d say No and tell everyone that it’s me and not the chair that’s making the noise.

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The Sky In February. **Jupiter** (at mag. –2.6 the 4th brightest object in the sky behind the **Sun**, **Moon** and **Venus**), rises at sunset in Feb. and rules the evening sky. Between 9:05 p.m.-10:45 p.m. on the evening of **Feb. 11th**, Jupiter’s moon **Europa** will, first, occult (pass in front of), and then eclipse (its shadow cross the disk of) **Ganymede**, another of Jupiter’s four visible moons.

Saturn (mag. 0) will still be in *Taurus*.

Venus (mag. –4.5) highlights the dawn and predawn hours, low in the SE. **Mars**, still faint but

gradually growing brighter, will be near *Antares* in *Scorpius*, to the upper right of Venus. You’ll probably need a hilltop to see **Mercury**, far to the lower left of Venus, during the first week of Feb.

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An Investigative Expose: The Uranus/Neptune Coverup

humor by **Bill Warren**

*(Editor’s Note: What follows are two broadly revised and updated articles that first appeared in the Nov., 1997 issue of the Observer. Re the first part: at the time this was written, I was a beginner using a 3-1/2” refractor. And as for the last part – hey, **Bill S.**, you have no one to blame but yourself. And me, of course.)*

I’ve been trying in vain for the past three months (of 1997) to find **Uranus** and **Neptune**. At mag. 5.8, Uranus should be easily visible in binoculars and a pushover for any telescope larger than a \$19.98 K-Mart Blue Light Special. It isn’t, though. I’ve looked everywhere it’s supposed to be, and it’s just not there. Neptune, 3 mags. fainter, is 15x more invisible to me than Uranus.

Before giving up on them, I decided to ask a couple of people who I thought should know about things like where Uranus is, so I talked to **Smitty** and **David Ward**. They hemmed and hawed when I asked them where to find Uranus, and finally they suggested that I check the monthly charts in *Sky & Telescope* and *Astronomy*. Well, I did that, but the charts showed this wavy line across the sky with several Moons in various stages on it and Uranus, Neptune and other planets dangling from the line like fish on a stringer. Then I compared the chart with the night sky and there wasn’t any wavy line up there – *and no Uranus or Neptune, either!*

And then it dawned on me, with the kind of clarity that **Felix Luciano** would get if he ever cleaned his eyepieces: **No wonder I couldn’t find Uranus or Neptune: They don’t exist!**

It was all part of an enormous subversive plot, I decided, to keep **Sir William Herschel**, the man who “discovered” Uranus in 1781, from being discredited. **Charles Messier** had his mistake (putting **M101** on his list twice), and Uranus was Herschel’s mistake. But they don’t want you to know that. Admitting after all these years that we have only five planets (I decided that **Mercury** and **Pluto** didn’t exist, either) would mean changing all the astronomy textbooks; it would make astronomers everywhere look like complete and utter fools (as if **Larry Fallin** weren’t already doing that); and it would completely undermine NASA’s efforts to salvage its planetary exploration program. Would *you* advocate the federal government spending billions of your tax dollars to support scientific expeditions to planets that don’t exist?

Steve K. says he’s *seen* Uranus and Neptune, but who’s to say that our beloved President Knight isn’t part of the conspiracy to fool us into believing that those planets (and Mercury and Pluto as well) actually exist?

For that matter, who’s to say that Steve Knight wasn’t on that grassy knoll in Dallas on Nov. 22, 1963? Don’t you find it strangely convenient that neither the Dallas police, the Texas rangers, the Warren Commission, the FBI, the CIA, nor any other investigative agency ever asked Steve where he was when Pres. Kennedy was assassinated? Hey, don’t be fooled by Steve’s flimsy alibi that he couldn’t have done it because he wasn’t even born yet! All it takes is just one look at Steve and you can tell that he’s guilty as sin. And if ever I’ve seen an object that looks like a murder weapon or an instrument of mass destruction, it’s the **Frankenscope!**

But enough of that.

I don’t care if the experts say that Uranus and Neptune are blue, green, purple or plaid; the fact is, *They don’t exist!* If you believe in the Tooth Fairy, you at least get a quarter under your pillow; with Uranus and Neptune, all you get is *heartache!*

All of which leads me to introduce you to my new observing program, the “**If You Don’t See It, It Ain’t There (And Doesn’t Exist) Club.**” After all, with such superb observing skills as yours and mine, don’t

you suppose we’d see those faint fuzzy wuzzies in the night sky if they were really there?

In my new observing club (which I’m sure you’ll agree is vastly superior to the A. L.’s Messier Club and the rest), you simply aim your ‘scope where you think an object ought to be, and you only get credit for it if it’s not there. You earn your certificate and pin by failing to find any 150 different objects in the night sky, with double credit for missing the Moon and triple credit for failing to find the sky (e.g., by forgetting to take off your dust cover).

There is no entry fee for my new club, but I *do* have shipping & handling expenses to consider. Just make out your certified check for \$2,500.00, payable to me. Don’t mail it to me, though; just palm the check to me while we’re shaking hands, and I’ll get you a pin, certificate, and a night’s free lodging in the Lincoln bedroom at the White House; for \$500 more, an intern will warm the sheets for you.

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Let’s wind things up this month with a little math puzzler about a double star.

The larger of two binary stars is 40 million years old – very young in celestial terms except in relation to its smaller companion that is only 10 million years old. The big star is *four* times older than the smaller star, right?

Okay, so five million years pass in the blinking of a cosmic eye. Now the large star is 45 million years old, the small one 15 million years old, and the larger star is only *three* times as old as its companion.

Fifteen million more years pass. Now the larger star is 60 million years old, the small one 30 million years old. The big star started off four times older than its companion, but now it’s only *twice* as old.

So here’s my question: *How many more years will have to pass before the two stars are the same age?*

P. S.: Don’t tell **Bill Snyder** the answer: he’s a Georgia Tech graduate, make him do like the constipated mathematician and work it out with a slide rule. (“Hmmm, let’s see. Divide by three, carry the two – *Wait a minute! How can it have a remainder of seven??!!*”)

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