

# THE FLINT RIVER OBSERVER

Newsletter of the Flint River Astronomy Club  
Vol. 7, No. 5 July, 2003

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**Club Calendar. Fri., Sat. & Sun., July 4-6:** Cox Field observings (at dark); **Wed.-Sat., July 9-12:** ALCON 2003 (Nashville, Tenn.); **Fri., July 18:** swimming /eating/meeting party (**Bill Warren's** house (address above: 6-7:00 swimming; 7-8:00 eating; meeting at 8:00); and **Fri.-Sat., July 25-26:** Cox Field observings (at dark).

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**President's Message.** Rain, rain and more rain. If you've been praying for rain, you can stop now. At least we've been able to work on various projects that have been lying around. At writing, I have the

electrical project almost done. The contacts are mounted and the strips have been run, most of the wiring is complete and the power box is mounted. All I need at this point is some decent skies to use it under.

**Smitty** is the culprit behind the bad weather this time. He talked long enough and finally did it: he is now the proud owner of a shiny new set of unused setting circles. **Smitty** bought a Starmaster Sky Commander system, and it was a great choice: excellent pointing accuracy and ease of use at a low price, making it one of the best systems on the market.

But enough about projects. I'm putting out a call for participants. I'll run a collimation session at our Aug. meeting at Beaverbrook, and anyone who has questions on how to align your optics should bring your 'scope and participate with me. The only way to learn is to do it firsthand. It isn't nearly as hard as it looks.

I may also show how I clean my optics so you can do that, too. While a little dust doesn't hurt anything, dirt gets in the way besides just being ugly. I may cover other maintenance items too, depending on time. You never know.

On the business front, we discussed many things at our June meeting, and we voted to get a new website. We'll vote on a name for it at the July pool party/potluck dinner/meeting at **Bill Warren's** house – and it should be up and running within weeks. Suggestions for a name thus far have included flintriverastronomy and frac-astro (the hyphen added so people wouldn't think our website had something to do with Castro), but you might be able to come up with something better. Just make sure to use FRAC or the full name in a way that people will be able to remember.

We also talked about the proposed 2004 star party, and we covered a lot of topics. While it won't be a major item at our July meeting, I encourage you to discuss any phase of the star party plans with me or any of the committee chairs. We're moving in new directions, and hopefully they'll be good ones. It looks like the best is yet to come, if it'll quit raining. Then I could at least do some radio astronomy.

Finally, I'm happy to introduce FRAC's newest member, **Erik Erikson** of Fayetteville. Many of you

should already know him, since he attended several meetings and observings before joining us. We hope you'll enjoy your time with us, Erik; let us know what we can do to make your membership in FRAC everything you wanted it to be when you joined the club.

**-Steve Knight**

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**Membership Renewals Due in July:** None.

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**Last Month's Meeting/Activities.** Despite lingering weather conditions that could only charitably be described as crummy, we had 14 at our late May Cox Field observings: **Smitty** and **Steve K.** (3 nights); **Doug Maxwell** and **yr. editor** (2 nights); and **Dawn K., David O'Keeffe, David Ward** and **Scott Hammonds** (1 night apiece). David W. is up to 188 of the Herschel 400s, all captured in his 6", f/5 'scope.

We had 11 attendees, including new member **Erik Erikson**, at our June meeting. Others present included: **Smitty, Steve & Dawn, Larry Fallin, Felix Luciano, Doug Maxwell, Curt & Irene Cole, Bill Snyder** and **yr editor**.

At impromptu observings at Cox Field on Fri.-Sat., June 20<sup>th</sup>-21<sup>st</sup>, the sky was as good as it ever gets hereabouts – better, even than Chiefland was on either of **yr. editor's** two visits there – and that's saying a *lot!* The transparency was about 6.5 on Sat. evening, and although the dew was heavy seeing remained a rock-steady 1 (on a scale of 1-5) until at least 3 a.m.

Still, if your name isn't **Steve Knight, Dawn Knight, Smitty, Doug Maxwell, Felix Luciano, Dan Newcombe** or **Bill Warren**, you probably don't know what perfect observing conditions are like for this area. And we **do** mean perfect: the air was just cool enough that we didn't even need insect repellent on Sat. night.

Two other notable incidents occurred on those nights. First, **Dawn** finished her Double Star Club observations; that pin will be her 5<sup>th</sup>, tying her with **Larry Higgins** for 3<sup>rd</sup> place in FRAC among present or former members. (**Yr. editor** has 13 pins, and **Phil**

**Sacco** has 11.) Wonder if Dawn realizes that she's halfway to earning a Master Observer pin...

Then there was what might be called the "**Great Saturday Night Unexplained Celestial Object Mystery**" – an object of unknown origin that **Doug** detected telescopically in the SW sky sometime around 11:15-11:30 p.m. Everyone present took turns observing it, so it wasn't a matter of Doug's having taken one too many sips of fermented joy juice.

"It looked like a really high satellite moving through the star field at a rather slow rate," Doug said, adding that it wasn't a naked-eye object.

The object moved "from west to east and apparently in line with the (celestial) equator," he went on, and "it behaved oddly...(and) looked like it was either rotating or tumbling because the brightness varied at regular intervals." Doug followed it for more than 90 minutes, during which time "it kept getting slower in relation to the star field." It was reduced to mag. 12 faintness by 12:30 a.m., and Doug finally lost it from view altogether about 12:45.

So what was it? By the time you read this someone will have come up with the answer, which will be relayed to you in next month's newsletter. For now, though, it's a guessing game – educated guesses, of course.

It wasn't a star: stars don't display W-to-E motion, and they don't fade away unless the observing conditions change. It wasn't a comet: comets don't display those kinds of motion or changes in brightness over a 90-minute period. And it wasn't a meteor: it was moving too slow.

**Smitty** opined that it might have been (a) a meteorological balloon (which would explain its slow movement and fading brightness, but not its regularly spaced changes in brightness), or (b) a rocket booster in an elongated orbit.

**Doug** believes that it might have been a satellite being placed in a geosynchronous earth orbit, or else something else (e.g., a Near-Earth Object) that was not in orbit but passing by and, as its distance from us increased and the Earth continued to turn, eventually was moving directly away from us in terms of its apparent motion.

Whatever the case, **Smitty** had the final word on the subject: "Sure was neat looking, wasn't it?"

And *that* was an opinion that everyone wholeheartedly agreed on.

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**Upcoming Meetings/Activities.** The new moon continues to plague our observing schedule. We'll start July with Cox Field observings on **Fri.-Sat., July 4<sup>th</sup>-5<sup>th</sup>...** And yeah, we know, you can't make it on the 4<sup>th</sup>. So if you can't make it on the 5<sup>th</sup>, either, try for **Sun., July 6<sup>th</sup>**. (The new moon will have been on June 29<sup>th</sup>.)

We won't have a Beaverbrook observing in July.

PLEASE NOTE: *Our July meeting will be held on **Fri., July 18<sup>th</sup>**, and not on the 2<sup>nd</sup> Thursday as we normally do.* We'll hold our annual pool party at **yr. editor's house at 1212 Everee Inn Rd.** in Griffin. We'll have swimming and pool play from 6-7:00, eating from 7-8:00, and a brief meeting at 8:00. Everyone in attendance is requested to bring along something edible or drinkable for our potluck meal.

To get to the Warren house from, say, N of Griffin, come S on U.S. Hwy. 19/41 and stay on the 4-lane past the Griffin exit, past Ga. Hwy 16 (the Newnan exit), past Ga. Hwy. 362 (the Williamson exit), and turn left at the stoplight at Airport Road. Turn right at the 4-way stop at Everee Inn Rd., and then go one block and turn left at Roberts St. (Our red brick house is on the left at that corner; there's an address sign in the front yard.) Park in the driveway, or on Roberts St.

We're pushing our meeting back a week and a day in order for some of our members to attend ALCON 2003 in Nashville, Tenn., from **Wed.-Sat., July 9<sup>th</sup>-12<sup>th</sup>**.

We'll finish off the month with observings at Cox Field on **Fri.-Sat., July 25<sup>th</sup>-26<sup>th</sup>**, three days after the new moon.

Our August meeting will be a hands-on session on collimation, and our Sept. meeting will feature something you'll enjoy very much, a FRAC quizbowl.

Our Cox Field observing weekend will be **Fri.-Sat., June 27<sup>th</sup>-28<sup>th</sup>**.

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**This 'n That.** FRAC member and Gordon College astronomy professor **Dr. Richard Schumde** appears, front row center, in a photo of the Royal Astronomical Society of Canada (RASC) that accompanies **Denis Grey's** article, "Going Royal: A Century of Public Service," in the July '03 issue of *Sky & Tel* (p. 69).

\*For a change, **ALCON 2003** – the A.L.'s annual national convention – will be within driving range this year, at Nashville, Tenn., from **Wed.-Sat., July 9<sup>th</sup>-12<sup>th</sup>**. The convention will feature: a top-notch slate of speakers including **Richard Schumde**; workshops on CCD and video imaging; vendors galore; and tours to places like the Marshall Space Flight Center, the Space and Rocket Center and Dyer Observatory. Of course, there'll also be the awards banquet where the A.L. presents this year's "Horkheimer Award" and other honors.

Several of our members have already registered or expressed an interest in attending ALCON 2003; early registration is past, but you can still register for the entire event for \$100 or by the day at the rate of \$30/day. There's a registration form in the March *Reflector*, or you can contact them at

<http://www.bsanashville.com>.

**Katie's** gonna be there; are you?

**\*Felix Luciano Observes Io Transit/ Shadow Transit.** "Date: May 26. Time of Observing: 9:50-11:44 p.m.

"9:50: Observed **Io** closing in on the E edge of **Jupiter**. From L to R: **Ganymede, Europa**, a dim star in line with the South Equatorial Belt, Jupiter, **Io** by the edge of Jupiter, and **Callisto** at the far right.

"10:13: **Io** seen as a dimple at Jupiter's E edge.

"10:20: For a few seconds, got a glimpse of **Io** as a very bright spot inside Jupiter's E rim.

"10:26: Could not see **Io**. A washout in the glare or background color of the equatorial band.

"11:44: Observed **Io's** shadow on Jupiter at the E part, close to the North Equatorial Band. The view was somewhat fuzzy, with Jupiter shimmering as it moved closer to the W horizon."

*(Keep up those observing reports, Felix: several members have mentioned how much they enjoy reading them! -Ed.)*

\*In addition to its new **Comet Club**, the A.L. has created a new observing program designed specifically for children below age 12. Called "**Sky Puppies**," this program doesn't require expensive purchases. All that is needed is "a pair of inexpensive binoculars, pencil and paper, and charts or a planisphere." (And a red flashlight. And insect repellent.) It's an ideal way for children to get started in astronomy, especially when their parent(s) give up a little "American Idol" time to go outside and spend some quality hours with them under the night sky.

For particulars on this neat new observing club for kids, just get on the web, type in [Astronomical League](#) and hit the GO key, then follow the directions to the A.L. Observing Clubs link. (You can, of course, do the same thing to access the Comet Club.)

Incidentally, they're selling a "Sky Puppies" manual to accompany the program. We don't have it yet, but it features a variety of projects tailored to the needs and interests of Sky Puppies, including hands-on projects, matching word exercises, coloring, word games, and includes a make-your-own planisphere project. Included with the manual is an audio cd-rom with a variety of constellation stories. The manual will be available soon through A.L. Sales.

If life were fair, they'd allow old codgers like **yr. editor, Bill Snyder** and **Ken Walburn** to earn Sky Puppy pins, since all three of us are well into second childhood. We're roadside breakdowns on the superhighway of life.

\*Don't forget to cast your vote for **Dr. Richard Schmude** for secretary of the Astronomical League. Instructions for registering your vote will appear in the June issue of the *Reflector*, which will be coming out soon.

Beyond the fact that he's a FRAC member, Richard deserves your vote because *no one is more highly qualified for the job than he is*. A vice president in A.L.P.O. (Association of Lunar and Planetary Observers), Richard is a tireless worker and a brilliant spokesman for astronomy. He has devoted

his entire professional life to astronomy and physics, yet he still finds time to attend (or speak at) our meetings and pursue his personal observing goals, i.e., studying **Mars, Jupiter** and other planets and logging variable star data. Astronomy is Richard's job, and he is both passionately devoted to it and very, very good at it.

Vote. For Richard. The A. L. needs him.

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**The Sky In July.** The July issue of *Astronomy* (p. 86) offers splendid finder charts for **Uranus** and **Neptune** this month. Like **Mars**, the distant gas giants are best found and observed after midnight. **Mercury** will be visible ½ degree N of **Jupiter** in the W sky on **July 25<sup>th</sup>** -- assuming, of course, that the clouds and rain go away.

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### **THREE BOOKS YOU HAVEN'T READ** **(Because They Don't Exist)**

**humor by Bill Warren**

**DEEP SKY 2000**, by **Til Wirion**. (Eight season-oriented, water-resistant, 9-1/2" x 16" charts, \$18.95.) The *good* news here is that world-famous astrocartographer **Til Wirion** has just come out with a potentially splendid resource for beginning and advanced observers alike: a low-budget sky atlas that plots, with typical Wirion precision, the locations of 2,000 deep-sky objects.

The *bad* news: Due to unfortunate printer's errors, all 2,000 objects were printed on the same chart and repeated on the other seven charts; and the stars and constellations appear in red ink that vanishes under a red-beam flashlight's glow.

To make matters worse, facing severe publishing deadlines Wirion inadvertently sent in, not the supporting data he had carefully researched and prepared, but his fifth-grade son's math homework. The overworked proofreaders should have guessed that something was wrong when they saw the peanut butter and jelly stains.

Nevertheless, the atlas is expected to attain best-seller status as the result of highly favorable reviews in the major monthly astronomy magazines, both of which just happen to carry full-page ads for *Deep Sky 2000* in every issue.

**STARLESS NIGHTS**, by Dame Patmore-Caldwell (\$15.95). Despite its title being an obvious ripoff of Leslie Peltier's classic *Starry Nights*, this hard-hitting expose by the wife of a highly respected British astronomer blows the lid off his alleged accomplishments.

"There ayn't been a clear sky at night in Hengland since 1923," Lady P-C writes, "so 'ow did the dotty old fool see all them bloomin' galaxies an' such wot 'e says 'e saw?"

"'E *didn't* see 'em," she confides, answering her own question. "Truth is, ol' Patty boy won't go outside at night because 'e's afraid of the dark. All 'e ever does is sit around the 'ouse at night, passin' gas and makin' up lists of things wot 'e ayn't never seen."

"The bloke's never even owned a telescope," she declares. "'E 'ad some binoculars once, but I broke 'em over 'is 'ead when I caught 'im lookin' in a neighbor's bedroom window." Maybe that's why he wears a monocle.

**TO MARS AND BACK IN THE FRANKENSCOPE**, by Steve Knight. (Subtitle: **4,258 Things You Can Do to Your Telescope Without Actually Destroying It.**) (\$22.95) Knight, a well-known tinkerer with skilled hands – ask any of the young ladies at Atlanta's Cheetah III Lounge – has a winner here. When you read his masterpiece, you'll ask yourself: *How did I ever exist without a 1,600-h.p., turbocharged Frankenscope that carries more complex inner workings than an Apollo lunar lander and enough raw firepower to defeat Iraq or send five astronauts to Mars and back?*

"Actually," Knight explains in his chapter on cosmology and astrophysics, "the Frankenscope's weight (698 lbs., give or take a couple of loose screws. –Ed.) is deceptive, at least, in terms of space travel.

"Those nine holes I drilled in the tube weigh nothing at all on Earth, right? Well, in gravity-free

space they'll weigh even less – sort of like antimatter, only different. And since, being holes, they contain no color and are therefore black holes, those two factors combined should permit the Frankenscope to exceed the speed of light.

"I wonder," he concludes, "if NASA needs any red-hot, high-tech specialists."

But then Knight brings us back to earth with a gentle reminder that he is, after all, "just an ordinary guy who rose from humble beginnings to become a high-flying, *space-defying*, EARTHQUAKING, 'SCOPE-SHAKING, solar-powering, *meteor-showering*, **GEE-WHIZZICAL**, **ASTROPHYSICAL GENIUS!!!**"

In the final analysis, though, it is Knight's ability to provide practical applications that make his work valuable. For example, in Chapter 14 ("Brunch, Anyone?") he explains how, if you cut off the sides of your Dob base, it makes a splendid lazy susan for meals at family get-togethers. And in Chapter 17 ("The Future Is Now – Well, Almost") he notes that, when you use his as-yet unpatented pop-in, pop-out mirror systems with a 42" Dob, the empty tube makes an excellent shelter for the homeless.

*(Editor's Note: I wanted to devote a special edition of the Observer to an interview with Mr. Knight, but it had to be postponed while doctors attempted to surgically remove his head from one of the holes he drilled in his telescope.*

*"I was just looking around in there," he explained sheepishly. All around the world, sheep bowed their heads in embarrassment.)*

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