

# THE FLINT RIVER OBSERVER

Newsletter of the Flint River Astronomy Club  
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**Club Calendar. Fri. & Sat., Aug. 1-2:** Cox Field observings (at dark); **Thurs., Aug. 14:** FRAC meeting (Beaverbrook, 7:30); **Fri., Aug. 15:** Beaverbrook Mars observing (at dark); and **Fri.-Sat., Aug. 29-30:** Cox Field observings (at dark).

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**Editor's Message.** As expected, the Astronomical League directors announced at ALCON 2003 that their annual membership dues would be raised in order to meet rising expenses within the organization. However, the increase – from \$3.50 to \$5.00 a year – was less than **Steve** and I thought it would be.

The rate hike was made necessary by the A. L.'s long-overdue move to establish a national headquarters in Kansas City, Mo., and by budget expansions that included each of the A. L.'s ten regions (ours is the Southeast Region, or SERAL, represented by FRAC member **Phil Sacco**) receiving \$1,200.00 a year to conduct their business and cover their expenses.

Each Region will now be able to hold its own meetings. The first SERAL meeting will be held at the Peach State Star Gaze at WhiteWater Express on Oct. 22-26.

FRAC has always supported the A. L., and will continue to do so in the foreseeable future. The club's founders regarded A. L. affiliation as critical to FRAC's growth and development, which indeed proved to be the case. One of our first official acts as a club back in 1997 was to apply for A. L. affiliate status.

FRAC's original bylaws and organizational structure were taken virtually verbatim from models provided by the A. L. And regardless of whether you are actively involved in pin collecting, those remarkable "observing clubs" offer wonderful incentives for getting out under the night sky. They also provide immediate direction and obvious starting points for beginners in learning about the night sky and how to observe it.

Wanta learn to recognize and navigate the constellations? The Messier Club takes you to 35 of them. Don't have a telescope yet, or just a small one? The Lunar, Binocular Messier, Deep-Sky Binocular and Universe Sampler clubs await your pleasure. Are there light pollution problems in your neighborhood? The Urban Club is designed for – and actually requires – those conditions. Other clubs – the total presently stands at 21 – offer in-depth experiences in virtually every area of visual astronomy. (Some even encourage photography and CCD-imaging of objects.)

Of course, no one has to participate in any of those programs; still, the opportunities afforded by the pursuit of observing certificates and pins are too great for us to even consider dropping our A. L. affiliation in order to free those funds for other club uses. We felt that way from the very beginning of FRAC, and

their raising their dues doesn't alter the fact that *We need the services they provide.*

Hey, the A. L. has *one* salaried employee. Everyone else associated with the organization – including **Dr. Schmude** – is doing so on a strictly volunteer basis (the way FRAC's own officers are doing), purely out of their love for the A. L. and belief in the importance of its purpose. So it's not like they're just trying to gouge the members for higher salaries.

Anyway, being part of the largest organization of amateur astronomers in the world shows that we're serious about astronomy, and that we're more than just a bunch of local yokels who happen to prefer meeting under the night skies to a monthly poker get-together.

The upshot of all this is that, **beginning Sept. 1, 2003, our FRAC dues will go up to \$15.00 a year.** Of that amount, \$5.00 will go to the A. L. and \$10.00 will go to FRAC.

If you want to take advantage of our present \$12.00 dues to add one or more years of FRAC membership at the present rate, you have until 9/1/03 to do so.

**-Bill Warren**

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**Membership Renewals Due in August: Jerry Carlson; Grady & Cory Dukes; Phil Sacco; and Chris, Kim, Kyle & Joseph Thompson.** Please send your \$12 check payable to **Steve Knight** or the Flint River Astronomy Club c/o Steve's address on p. 1.

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**Last Month's Meeting/Activities.** Our early July observings were a bust, thanks to skies that didn't seem to care that we might like to do some stargazing this summer at Cox Field.

ALCON 2003, on the other hand, was a huge success, as you'll find out later. FRAC was well represented by **Tom Moore**, his wife **Kathy** and daughter **Katie**, **Felix Luciano** and **Curt & Irene Cole**.

We had 12 at our July meal/meeting: **Curt Cole, John Wallace, Steve & Dawn Knight, Larry Fallin,**

**Doug & Laura Maxwell, Felix Luciano, Bill Snyder, Smitty, Louise Warren** and yr. editor. The big news coming out of the meeting was that we voted on a name for our new web site: It's [www.flintriverastronomy.org](http://www.flintriverastronomy.org). By the time you read this, Steve will have given **David Ward** the okay to get the site set up and running – if, that is, the name is still available. We'll let you know how things stand in the Sept. issue.

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**Upcoming Meetings/Activities.** We'll begin the month with Cox Field observings on **Fri.-Sat., Aug. 1<sup>st</sup>-2<sup>nd</sup>**, three days after the new moon.

Having survived – barely – the rainy months of early summer while Beaverbrook was closed, we'll be back at the 'Brook in August for our 7:30 club meeting on **Thurs., Aug. 14<sup>th</sup>**. **Steve Knight** and **Larry Fallin** will take us through the ins & outs of mirror collimation and eyepiece cleaning.

On the following evening, **Fri., Aug. 15<sup>th</sup>**, we'll renew our Beaverbrook observings, setting up behind the trailers at the rear of the school.

We didn't put it on the club calendar because we don't consider it an "official" club activity, but if anyone wants to come out to Cox Field on **Wed., Aug. 27<sup>th</sup>** for an informal **Mars** observing during the evening of its close flyby, we'll be there -- "we" meaning yr. editor, **Doug**, and maybe **Felix, Steve** and a few more of the regulars (or irregulars, whichever the case may be). The new moon falls on that evening, so the sky should be appropriately dark. Let's hope it's clear, too!

We'll close the month with club observings at Cox Field on **Fri.-Sat., Aug. 29<sup>th</sup>-30<sup>th</sup>**, two days after the new moon. A few of the guys – **Scott Hammonds** and **Steve & Dawn**, for example – are considering going down to Chiefland on that weekend, but our Cox Field observings will go on as scheduled. We'll miss you, guys, but not if it's clear here and cloudy in Florida.

Our September meeting will consist of the most fun you've ever had that didn't involve beer or members of the opposite sex, i.e., a FRAC astronomy quizbowl competition, with trophies for all contestants. And in October, the A. L.'s newly

elected secretary, **Dr. Richard Schmude**, will be our speaker, his topic “**Mars.**” Maybe he can tell us what that white stuff is that we keep seeing at one end of Mars. (On **Bill Snyder**, we might think it was dandruff.)

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**SCHMUDE NAMED A. L. SECRETARY.** Thanks to some sloppy editing in the previous paragraph, the secret is out and you already know that, at ALCON 2003, **Dr. Richard Schmude** defeated longtime A. L. Sales coordinator **Marion Bechtel** in the race for secretary of the Astronomical League.

Dr. Schmude, who is also vice president of the Association of Lunar and Planetary Observers (ALPO) and chairman of its Outer Planets Committee, is a professor of astronomy and physics at Gordon College in Barnesville. In addition to teaching a full load of classes, Richard also has found time to give about 90 presentations to various professional and amateur astronomy groups, including two talks on Mars and Jupiter at this year’s ALCON, where the election was held. Those appearances certainly didn’t hurt his election chances in terms of voters who may not have known him previously.

Richard’s new book, *Observing Jupiter*, will be available from the A. L. this fall, and he is presently developing a Jupiter observing club for the A. L.

Richard is actively involved in the Royal Astronomical Society of Canada (RASC), and his research activities and projects are so numerous and varied that it probably will take a special edition of the *Observer* to cover them all.

All of us in FRAC are extremely proud of Dr. Schmude, and we rejoice with him in his latest achievement. It’s the most welcome change in the A. L. since **Vic & Jen Winter** took over as co-editors of the *Reflector* a couple of years ago.

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**This ‘n That.** For two months now we’ve told you to vote for **Dr. Schmude** as secretary of the A. L. As it turned out, the voting took place at ALCON 2003 and clubs got just one vote each, with that vote weighted by the size of the club under a formula that is only

slightly less complex than the BCS college football ratings system.

For example, an at-large member’s vote counted, at best, as something like 1/40<sup>th</sup> of a club’s single vote, and the AAC’s vote carried roughly 7-1/2 times as much weight as ours did. Or something like that.

FRAC’s Alcor, **Tom Moore**, cast our vote for Dr. Schmude.

\*Here’s an odd tale from **Smitty**: While driving home from Cox Field one evening last month, he saw a deer in the road ahead. Already driving slow, Smitty pulled over to the far side of the road and stopped, waiting for the deer to decide what it was going to do. Instead of bolting away, in its confused state the deer ran straight at Smitty’s van and broadsided it, and then raced away unhurt. Luckily, the van was undamaged: the metal gave with the impact, and then popped back in place.

\***There’s A New Dog Star in the Heavens.** **Ricky**, the younger and more sociable of the Coxses’ two dogs (and who acted as if his survival depended on **Dawn & Steve’s** feeding him bits of their hamburgers), has, like faithful *Old Shep* in the song of that name, “gone where the good doggies go.” Mrs. Cox ran over Ricky when he failed to move out of the way as she was backing out of the garage. He died two days later.

**Daisy**, the Coxses’ other dog, has been lost without her friend, and we share her sorrow at his passing. He was our friend, too. We’ll miss you, Ricky.

\*Last month’s unidentified celestial object sighting (which still remains a mystery) brings up a question that the *Observer* has never before fully addressed: ***If you think you’ve discovered a new comet, how do you report your findings?***

First, of course, you should strive to ensure that what you saw wasn’t a star, planet, asteroid, previously known comet, etc., before contacting the agency that handles such reports. And it must be done quickly, too, lest someone else’s name be affixed to a comet that **you** discovered but didn’t report in time to receive credit for your discovery.

Computerized programs such as *Megastar 5* plot the locations of millions of stars down to mag. 15 or fainter, and a number of Internet sources and software programs can tell you the locations of satellites, known comets, asteroids, etc..

Having located an unknown celestial object that you suspect is a new comet, you should promptly contact the International Astronomical Union's Central Bureau for Astronomical Telegrams (CBAT, for short) at [cbat@cfa.harvard.edu](mailto:cbat@cfa.harvard.edu). The information they require includes:

- \*Your name, address and contact details (preferably e-mail address; otherwise, your telephone or fax number);

- \*The date and Universal Time (UT) of your observation;

- \*Your observation method (e.g., naked-eye, visual telescopic observation, etc.);

- \*Specific details of instrumentation (e.g., aperture size, f/ratio, etc.);

- \*Observation site: name of location, giving either city/town and state/province/country, or longitude, latitude and elevation. The elevation of Cox Field is 840 ft., its latitude/longitude 33 09 22N, 84 25 50 W.

- \*Background information regarding your observing experience;

- \*Oh, and by the way, they'll want either right ascension and declination coordinates or at least a close approximation of where you saw it in the sky, along with a description of what you saw (estimated brightness, etc.).

That may seem like a lot of information for CBAT to expect of you, but it's the way **David Levy**, **Carolyn Shoemaker** and other comet-hunters report their findings, so it should be good enough for everyone else. Happy hunting!

CBAT has other links for reporting things like meteor fireball sightings. You can find out all you need to know and do by going to the IAU website.

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**The Sky In August.** We're talking **MARS** here, folks. On **Aug. 27<sup>th</sup>**, Mars will swing closer to the Earth (34.6 million miles) than it's been since **Ken Walburn** was a pup some 57,000 years ago. The Red Planet will rise about 10 p.m. in early August, but by the end of the month it will be up all night. By then, it

will be more than half as large as **Jupiter** in our view, and will shine brightly enough to cast a shadow on the ground behind you. Don't forget to look for it (your shadow, that is). **"Punxsatawney Phil" Sacco** doubtless will do so; you should too. Maybe seeing your shadow will give us six months of clear skies.

Here's another challenge: If your 'scope is 8" or larger, see if you can spot the two Martian moons **Deimos** (mag. 11.6) and **Phobos** (mag. 10.5). Look for them while they are as far away from the planet as they ever get (called their *periods of greatest elongation*); for Deimos that will be about 3 Mars-widths from the planet, and for Phobos it will be about one Mars-width, *S&T* (Aug. '03) informs us. Because Phobos is closer to Mars, its periods of greatest elongation are more frequent than those of Deimos. Like the Earth, Mars rotates from west to east, and the Martian moons are found in that plane.

**If you can spot either or both of them, we'll present you with a "Katie's Club" certificate** (suitable for framing), which is far more valuable than a "Sam's Club" card. Katie's Club isn't about spending money, it's about spending quality time under the stars.

It takes tiny Phobos (potato-shaped, measuring something like 17-1/3 mi. x 12-1/2 mi.) just 7 hrs. and 39 min. to orbit Mars, while even smaller Deimos – 10 mi. x 7-1/2 mi. – orbits the planet in 30 hrs. and 18 min. *Astronomy* lists the best times of eastern elongation for both moons between Aug. 22-31.

Since Mars is something like 200,000 times brighter than its moons, you might want to consider making an occulting bar (they aren't commercially available) to block out Mars while you're looking for its moons; failing that, you should move Mars out of the field of view since the moons will dissolve within the planet's overwhelming brightness.

Despite its being the brighter of the two, Phobos will be more difficult to see because it lies so close to Mars.

Elsewhere, there is the **Perseids meteor shower**, peaking on the morning of the 13<sup>th</sup>, just one day after the full moon. The lunar glare will hide the fainter Perseids meteors but, as *Astronomy* points out, "The Perseids tend to be bright and often leave persistent trains, so some good activity should shine through the

unwanted light.” (p. 68) *Astronomy* also notes that “Meteors always appear better in the early morning hours because that’s when we are watching them from the leading hemisphere of Earth. (It’s the same reason a car driving through rain picks up more rain on the front windshield than the rear one.)”

The Perseids are arguably the most dependable of the annual meteor showers, producing about 50 an hour at peak, with 12 or more meteors per hour for two days before and after the peak period.

Normally, we hold an informal “Perseids party” at Cox Field on the evening before the next morning’s peak, but with the full moon overhead this year and seven other Aug. nights devoted to FRAC activities we decided not to do it. But that doesn’t mean you can’t or shouldn’t take your family outside to observe the Perseids in your backyard.

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### Smitty’s Snippets

#### **Quotations gleaned from the extensive astronomy reading of Steven “Saratoga Smitty” Smith**

A plain Chaldean shepherd, more than three thousand years ago, probably knew the sky better than most of our college graduates today, yet to him the earth was a flat disc and he probably believed that the stars were little lamps carried by special deities across the solid ceiling of the sky vault every night, in strictly prescribed and never-changing formations.

-H. A. Rey  
*THE STARS: A New Way to See Them*  
1976: Mariner Books, p. 17.

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Amateur astronomy has finally come into its own as a legitimate recreational activity, not the pastime of perceived lab-coated rocket scientists and oddballs. Indeed, it has emerged as a leisure activity with a certain prestige. Unlike some hobbies, it is not possible to buy your way into astronomy. Astronomical knowledge and experience take time to accumulate. But be forewarned: Once you gain that

knowledge and experience, astronomy can be addictive.

-Terence Dickinson and Alan Dyer,  
*The Backyard Astronomer’s Guide, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed.*  
Toronto (Firefly Books, 2002), p. 13.

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Up to then (Allan) Sandage had had little contact...with the Mount Wilson astronomers. To... graduate students (such as Sandage), Mount Wilson sat across town like a sort of unapproachable colossus. The observatory offices had the atmosphere of a Victorian gentlemen’s club. The astronomers wore suits. On the mountain they dressed for dinner and ate on real linen. The halls were carpeted and paneled with oak. The sign on the men’s room door read *Gentlemen*. Sandage went to see (Edwin) Hubble feeling tremulous. It was like an audience with God.

-Dennis Overbye  
*Lonely Hearts of the Cosmos*  
1999: Little, Brown & Co., p. 20.

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Planetariums and science museums offer informative, even thrilling programs. But the shows and displays are always mediated by professionals, and the voyage away from Earth is scripted tightly. Even the best of them is no substitute for exploring the heavens on your own.

-Robert Burnham, quoted in  
*The Backyard Astronomer’s Guide, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed.*,  
*ibid.*, p. 5.

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