

THE FLINT RIVER OBSERVER

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

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Club Calendar. Fri. & Sat., Aug. 22-23: Cox Field observings (at dark); **Tues., Aug. 26th:** Orrs Elementary School (Griffin) observing (8:30); **Fri.-Sat., Aug. 29-30:** Cox Field observings (at dark) *or* Chiefland trip; **Tues, Sept. 2:** Orrs observing makeup date (if necessary, 8:30); **Thurs., Sept. 11:** FRAC meeting (Beaverbrook, 7:30); **Fri., Sept. 12:** Beaverbrook observing (at dark); **Fri.-Sat., Sept. 19-20,** and **Fri.-Sat., Sept. 26-27:** Cox Field observings (at dark); and **Fri.-Sun., Sept. 26-28:** Tennessee Star Party.

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President's Message. If you tune your browser to www.flintriverastronomy.org, you'll find the new FRAC website that **David Ward** started for us. While it won't look different at first, what you will notice is the total lack of popups. That in itself is worth the expense, but there's more. For \$5 a year, you can have a FRAC e-mail address, and we'll have much more room for things like ads, a bulletin board, and anything else we want to do with it. We get to play by our own rules this time, and on our terms. We owe a *big* Thanks! to David for doing such a wonderful job with the website since he took it over, and for distributing the newsletters by e-mail.

While I'm at it, here's another well-deserved Thanks! to **Larry** for mailing the hard copies. In fact, I need to recognize a few more people who don't get the credit they deserve for their work behind the scenes.

I'll start with **Bill Warren**: he not only writes the newsletter, but he is also our observing chair, FRAC's longest-running officer (vice president for 6 years), he keeps the club's mailing address, serves as unofficial club historian, keeps me in line, and I'm sure I missed something in there.

Larry Fallin, our current vice president, is a calm voice and reasonable mind whenever things get hectic and close to the edge. Practical to the end, Larry keeps our plans and ideas realistic, focusing on things that can work.

Dawn Knight, my lovely and talented wife (and club secretary), keeps me straight on what I said last month, and she is my first line of defense when things get hairy. She's the one who gives me the ability to do this job with no practical experience at running anything.

Smitty has words of wisdom and experience that I can lean on. If you see us off to the side at Cox Field, you can bet that there's a problem and I don't know what to do about it. The old sea dog has a sharp mind and a few tricks up his sleeve that have been very useful in the past.

David Ward, FRAC's computer guru, keeps up our public image and also has a practical mind that helps me in staying realistic. (Now, if I can just get him to come out more often...)

Doug Maxwell, full of ideas, makes real world suggestions that the club can live with; he is very enthusiastic and works very hard at anything asked of him. Plus, I doubt you will find anyone, anywhere who is better at home-built gadgets.

Then there is **Felix Luciano**. Rarely do you find anyone as excited and happy to be here as Felix. Like Doug, if you ask anything of Felix, it's done. Felix has a real observer's eye and wrings out details in objects that most of us never imagine. He makes you see them also, really opening some horizons.

And what about **Tom Moore**? Anybody who can capably fill the club librarian post while spending every night searching for Lunar Club targets has my respect – and my thanks as well. It's anybody's guess which will come first, **Katie** getting her Ph.D. in astrophysics or Tom bagging Lunar feature #100 – but don't bet against Katie.

I could go on and on about the people who run FRAC, and fill two months of newsletters with thanks to all of them. I'm merely the figurehead; these are the people who make sense of my sometimes insane ideas. They're the driving force, the ones who make things work. I couldn't imagine surviving without them. Next time you see these people, please thank them for their hard work. They truly deserve it.

Elsewhere, you need to get your form in *now* if, like Dawn and me, you're planning to attend the Tennessee Star Party. It runs from Sept. 26th through Sept. 28th, and you can contact them at www.bsanashville.com.

Finally, don't forget to send in your registration form and check for the Chiefland Star Party. It will run from Nov. 16th through Nov. 23rd this year, so you need to start making your plans to attend now, before you forget.

-Steve Knight

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Membership Renewals Due in September: None.

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Last Month's Meeting/Activities. On July 25th, **Steve & Dawn** ventured out to Cox Field, found it

cloudy and left. Later that evening, **David & Brendon O'Keeffe** went out and stayed till after 3 a.m. under much improved skies.

The next evening, 7 members – **Dawn & Steve, David & Brendon, Doug Maxwell, Smitty** and **yr. editor** – got in some good observing under decent skies.

We had 11 at our Aug. meeting to learn from **Steve** and **Larry** about simplified collimation and optics cleaning techniques. Attendees included **Curt Cole, Tom Moore, Bill Snyder, Dawn, David Ward, Felix Luciano, Doug, John Wallace, Smitty** and **yr. editor**. Smitty won the door prize, a hardback copy of **David Levy's** *Advanced Skywatching*.

John Wallace and **yrs. truly** took a chance on a cloudy evening at BB on Aug. 15th – and encountered about 15-20 children and parents eager to see what the night sky had to offer. We showed them lots of clouds, and in the process talked with them about stargazing for more than an hour.

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Upcoming Meetings/Activities. We have a late-scheduled public observing slated for the latter portion of August; that's why we're getting the *Observer* to you a bit early this month.

But first, please note that we're adding a Cox Field observing weekend on **Fri.-Sat., Aug. 22nd-23rd**, that did not appear in the Aug. club calendar. Although only 2-3 days after the Last Qtr. Moon, those dates should give us some deep-sky observing before moonrise turns our attention to **Mars**.

Three days later, on **Tues., Aug. 26th**, we'll be at Orrs Elementary School in Griffin to conduct an "M&M" (Mars and the **Moon**) observing for the school's 4th graders. We hope you'll join us on that night to show the kids what we've been ooh-ing and aah-ing about for so long. (No, **Steve** and **Doug**, we're not talking about your telescopes, we're referring to **Mars**. Maybe it'll be up early enough by then for the kids to see it.)

Since Tuesday is a school night, we'll start at 8:30 -- and if the weather's bad we'll try again the following Tuesday, **Sept. 2nd**. Whichever date works out, we'll follow our normal routine: *If the weather*

looks bad where you are, stay home. We won't take the kids indoors.

To get to Orrs from, say, N of Griffin, come S on Hwy. 19/41 like you're going to Cox Field. Go past the RR overpass and the Griffin exit, and get off at the next exit (Ga. Hwy. 16; it's the Griffin/Newan exit, the one before you normally get off at Ga. Hwy. 362 to go to Cox Field).

Turn left onto Hwy. 16, go over the bridge and turn left again at the first stoplight about ¼ mi. away. (There's a filling station on the left.) Go past Home Depot on the right and turn left at the 4-way stop sign. Go one block and turn right, and then turn left into the driveway that leads to the brightly lighted parking lot – aren't they all? -- in front of the school. That's where we'll set up for the observing.

Don't forget to mark down that **Tues., Sept. 2nd** makeup date on your calendar: we may need it if the weather is bad or Mars isn't up by the children's beddy-bye time.

Despite the fact that a few members will be heading down to Chiefland, Fla., on **Fri.-Sat., Aug. 29th-30th**, we'll still hold Cox Field observings on those dates.

Our club meeting (Beaverbrook, 7:30) on **Thurs., Sept. 11th**, will feature something we've never done before: a FRAC astronomy quizbowl, complete with trophies and certificates of achievement for everyone who participates.

The way it works is this: Those who choose to participate will be placed on one of two teams, each of which has its own set of 4 electronic buzzers. The moderator – **yr. editor** – will ask a Tossup Question, and whoever buzzes in first from either team will answer the question. If he/she answers correctly, that team receives 10 pts. and gets a 20-pt. Bonus Question which can be answered only by that team, with a 30-sec. time limit for the members to prepare their answers. If, however, the Tossup Question is answered incorrectly, the question will be repeated for the other team, with a Bonus Question for them if they answer the Tossup Question correctly.

Most of the Tossup Questions will be rather easy (see examples below), but that's not the problem: the *real* challenge of Quizbowl is to buzz in before the other team does, in order to get a shot at the 20-pt.

Bonus Questions that your whole team can participate in. Here are a few sample Tossup Questions:

1. Who was the first person to use a telescope to study the night sky?
2. Which one of the nine planets in our solar system was not named for a deity from Greek or Roman mythology? (Hint: Look down.)
3. What do **Collinder 399**, **Brocchi's Cluster** and **The Coathanger** have in common?

(Answers on p. 5.)

Hey, there's something for everyone here, folks! If you don't know the answers – or if you're too shy to be an active participant – just don't buzz in. Let someone else do it. You'll still get a trophy and certificate anyway, win or lose.

Dr. Richard Schmude will serve as judge, and **Greg Potter** will keep score. The Quizbowl sets will be provided by Beaverbrook and set up by **Louise Warren**.

We'll have a Beaverbrook "M&M" observing the following evening, on **Fri., Sept. 12th**, two days past the full moon. (It'll be an "M" – **Moon** – observing if we can't find somewhere on campus to show Mars above the treeline.)

Then, on **Fri.-Sat., Sept. 19th-20th**, we'll enjoy perfect weather at Cox Field for our own M&M session, with deep-sky observing until the 1-day-old 3rd Quarter Moon rises. Mars will still be available, although by then its former size and brightness will be somewhat diminished.

The following weekend will bring even better observing conditions at Cox Field on **Fri.-Sat., Sept. 26th-27th**, with the new moon on the 26th.

Dawn & Steve will be attending the **Tennessee Star Party** from **Fri.-Sun., Sept. 26th-28th**. Anyone who'd like to go along should begin making arrangements immediately. You should call Steve and/or contact the folks in Tennessee at

www.bsanashville.com .

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This 'n That. Congratulations to **Doug Maxwell** for earning his Honorary Messier certificate and pin.

***From Alex Langoussis:** “I read with interest the article on what to do if you think you’ve found a comet. Hope you don’t mind if I add a few things.

“First, in regards to comets, they (and asteroids) *move*. It is important to note the change in position over time. You should be able to notice motion in less than an hour. Making a drawing with field stars will greatly help with this, as well as determining the exact R.A. and Dec. Sending in the motion also assists in recovering the object.

“Second, make sure what you’ve found hasn’t been found already! I discovered a comet once, but someone else already beat me to it – by about 100 years!

“Don’t trust your software on this. Checking the IAU’s Minor Planet Checker at <http://scully.harvard.edu/~cgi/CheckSN> can save you a boatload of embarrassment. It’s probably saved me from making about 20 erroneous supernova reports.

“Finally, if you happen to discover a comet while you’re at the Peach State Star Gaze this fall, simply walk over to **Brian Marsden** and tell him.” (Dr. Marsden was director of CBAT for 32 years, from 1968-2000.)

*It hasn’t been much of a summer for those of us who appreciate seeing more than an occasional star at Cox Field. But just because it’s been that way from mid-June through early August doesn’t mean that conditions won’t improve in September as the air begins to cool.

Still, there’s a lesson here: if you limit your observing opportunities to the scheduled Cox Field weekend dates, you’ll miss whatever the sky has to offer between those dates – and you’ll be shut out entirely if, as has been the case all too frequently this summer, clouds dominate our observing dates.

Felix Luciano has the right idea: on any given evening (or morning, for that matter), take a quick peek outside – No, **Ken Walburn**, we said *peek*, not *leak* – and if it’s clear grab your binoculars or telescope and set up in your driveway, backyard or wherever. Whether you’re after old masterpieces or new challenges, the sky has an endless array of marvels and wonders to remind you of why you

became interested in astronomy in the first place. But it might not matter if you limit yourself to hoping that one of our scheduled observing nights will be clear.

*The new FRAC website is up: it’s www.flintriverastronomy.org. If you’d like to purchase an e-mail address on it for the amazingly low price of \$5 per year, contact **Steve Knight** or **David Ward**. (See p. 1, upper left hand section.) Your e-mail address will be yourname@flintriverastronomy.org.

The FRACgroups Yahoo site for private discussions among members will remain unchanged.

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The Sky In September. **Mars**, still bright after its Aug. flyby, will continue to dominate the night sky throughout the month, rising just after sundown and staying up all night. It will share evenings with green **Uranus** (mag. 5.7, located near the mag. 5.4 star **38 Aqr**), blue **Neptune** (mag. 7.9, located near the middle of *Capricornus*) and **Saturn** (mag. 0.1), which will rise after midnight in September. **Venus** will be up in late Sept., but will be very low in the W, setting about half an hour after sunset.

Mercury and **Jupiter** will be “morning stars” in the E from late September through early October, Jupiter being the brighter of the two and to the upper right of Mercury. Both of them are, like Mars and Saturn, naked-eye planets. On the morning of **Sept. 24th**, the rising crescent **Moon**, Mercury and Jupiter will be within 10 degrees of each other 30 min. before sunrise; and on the **26th** Mercury will be 18 degrees above the rising **Sun**, but be careful anyway.

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ASK PROFESSOR STARGAZER

humor by Bill Warren

Hey, astronomy fans!, look who’s back: It’s the world’s foremost authority on the universe and everything in it, FRAC’s own **Professor Theophilus Stargazer**. He’s here to share his vast knowledge

with you. Now, who has the first question for the professor?

David O’Keeffe: I do, Professor. Is Theophilus Stargazer really your name?

Prof. Stargazer: No, it’s a description of my observing skills.

Brendon O’Keeffe: Why is our galaxy called the “Milky Way”?

Prof. Stargazer: It was named for its discoverer (or creator, if you’re an atheist), a 5th-century B.C. Chinese astronomer named **Mil** (pronounced “Bruce”) **Kee Wai**.

Incidentally, Brendon, you might be interested to know that the world’s first alcoholic beverage was named for that ancient Oriental astronomer: Even today, men everywhere tell their wives, “Hey, hon, I’m dry; pop me open another Bruce Kee.”

Curt Cole: I’ve always wondered, Professor: is it still considered “naked-eye” observing if you wear glasses or contact lenses?

Prof. Stargazer: Actually, Curt, the term “naked-eye” is a misnomer. In reality, it refers to a group of nudist stargazers in Florida who call themselves the **Naked “I” Astronomy Club**. Since the average age of its members is 73, they probably *do* look at the sky most of the time. That part of Florida leads the universe in sales of mosquito repellent.

Grady Dukes: Is it true that stars form from gases?

Prof. Stargazer: Put simply, Grady, the answer is Yes. That’s why Prof. Stargazer keeps his telescope aimed toward **Ken Walburn’s** house. I’m gonna be the first one in FRAC to discover a supernova.

Smitty: Who are the **Sidewalk Astronomers**?

Prof. Stargazer: Good question, Smitty. They’re a group of San Francisco-based amateur astronomers, led by **John Dobson**, who show passersby reflections of the night sky in puddles on city sidewalks. In dry weather, they bring their dogs along. A drought observing is a “Three-Dog Night”.

Dan Newcombe: Speaking of **John Dobson**, didn’t he invent something?

Prof. Stargazer: He sure did, Dan: A drawing of the so-called “Dobsonian Mount” appears in Chapter 6 of the *Kama Sutra*.

Bill Warren: I’m our club’s observing chairman, Professor, and I lost my calendar. Can you suggest a way for me to remember how many days there are in each month?

Prof. Stargazer: Sure. Just remember this little ditty: “*Thirty days hath September, April, June and David Ward.*” David’s 30 days were for disturbing the peace at a star party. (He refused to park his generator-powered camper five miles from the observing site.)

Prof. Stargazer has time for one more question.

Jerry Williams: I’ve got one, Professor: A friend of mine in western Kentucky says his astronomy club conducts its observings deep underground inside Mammoth Cave, and he hasn’t seen a single star in the past 15 years. What can he do about it?

Prof. Stargazer: Beats me. We’ve had the same problem at Cox Field.

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Answers to Quizbowl Questions (p. 2): 1. Galileo. 2. Earth. (It comes from the Old English word oerthe, or yrth, which meant “to plow.”) 3. They’re names for the same object, a coathanger-shaped asterism in *Vulpecula*.)

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Next Month: We’ll take a look at **Larry Fallin’s** and **Dawn Knight’s** newly completed “**FRAC 50 Observing Program**.” Here’s a sneak preview, though: It’s *grrrrreat!*

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