

THE FLINT RIVER OBSERVER

Newsletter of the Flint River Astronomy Club
Vol. 8, No. 2 April, 2004

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Club Calendar. Thurs., Apr. 8: FRAC meeting (Beaverbrook media center, 7:30); **Fri.-Sat., Apr. 16-17 and Fri., Apr. 23:** Cox Field observings (at dark); **Sat., Apr. 24:** Astronomy Day public observing (Kohl's Dept. Store, Fayetteville, 4-10:00); and **Fri., Apr. 30:** ACS "Relay For Life" all-night observing (Spalding Co. H. S., 7 p.m.).

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President's Message. Greetings to all from your new president! Veteran FRAC members know me

well and that I've held this office in the past; new members can find me on a dark observing field by looking for a bear-like person (a teddy bear, though), and in the daytime by my wild beard and tattoos.

The last time I held this office was during the transition into the new millennium, a great period in time, especially for astronomy. Many great things happened and were discovered in the 20th century, in both professional and amateur astronomy and space exploration. I'm proud to have represented FRAC as your leader at the change of one century to another. In this first part of the 21st century I am again proud to be in office as there are many happenings and discoveries being made as I hold the presidential post.

NASA has two exploratory rovers on Mars, and the Hubble Space Telescope continues to make news, both with fantastic deep field space images and a controversy about keeping Hubble operational that is still to be settled. A new member of our solar system has been discovered, a planetoid (tentatively named **Sedna**) that has a large and eccentric orbit. **Tom Clark** of Chiefland, Fla., will have one of the largest amateur telescopes in operation shortly, a 42-inch, permanently-mounted box-style Dobsonian. Most importantly, FRAC will be holding its first full-blown star party – **Georgia Sky View 2004** – and I hope to see all of our members there!

On a personal note, like many other FRAC members I am getting a new telescope. Nope, I'm not telling you what it is! Here's a fun little contest for you: "*Guess the President's New 'Scope.'*" When my telescope arrives, if anyone has guessed correctly what it is, they'll win a prize. If nobody wins, we'll use that prize as an additional door prize at one of our meetings, so you might have two chances to win. Start guessing!

Oh, one more thing: this contest cannot have more than one winner – no ties! Only one person can name a particular 'scope. However, a person can change their selection at any time until the telescope arrives. I'll keep a listing of entrants and their choices at the FRACyahoogroups site, and it will be open to anyone who wants to see it.

Finally, please join me in welcoming FRAC's newest members, the **Jenkinses** – **Jamie, Tonya,**

Drew, Jerica & Jaycon. They're good folks, and will add much to our club.

-Steven (Saratoga Smitty" Smith

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Membership Renewals Due in April: Doug Maxwell; and Dan Newcombe. Please send your \$15 check payable to FRAC c/o **Steve Knight** at his address on p. 1.

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Last Month's Meeting/Activities. Eight members showed up at Cox Field on Feb. 21st: **Steve & Dawn Knight, Felix Luciano, David & Brendon O'Keeffe, Curt Cole, Doug Maxwell** and **yr. editor.**

A week later, on Feb. 28th, there were six at Cox Field: **Lyle Fischer** of MGAS, **Doug M., Dan Newcombe, Smitty, John Wallace** and **yr. editor.**

We had 17 in attendance at our March club meeting: **Chuck Sims, Tim Astin, Dan N., Felix L., Doug, Bill Snyder, Dawn & Steve, Curt & Irene Cole** and **Curt's mother, Tom Moore, David Ward, Larry Fallin, Smitty, Dr. Richard Schmude** and **yr. editor.** Larry and Steve offered a wealth of information and suggestions regarding how to do a Messier Marathon.

Five members eventually showed up at Cox Field on Mar. 12th after **Felix** came early, waited awhile and left (we thought he'd *never* leave): **Steve & Dawn, Smitty, Doug** and **yr. editor.** The following evening, five regulars showed up under iffy skies: **Smitty, Doug, Dawn & Steve** and **yr. editor.**

March 19th brought eight members to Cox Field: **Steve & Dawn, Dan, Felix, Chuck, Jim & David Hamilton** and **yr. editor**, under a sky that was much better than it looked at first glance. And on the following evening under skies that could only be charitably be described as lousy, only five of us – **Dawn & Steve, Chuck, Smitty** and **yr. editor** – were there to witness an occurrence that most observers can only dream of: **Dawn Knight** *finding and observing the Horsehead without a telescope, binoculars or a filter!* (Before conferring legendary status on Dawn,

we should point out that what she saw was the top of a tree to the N of Cox Field that looks exactly like the Horsehead.)

On Mar. 23rd, **Chuck, Steve & Dawn** and **yr. editor** showed the sky to about 50 children and adults at Futral Road Elem. School. And what fun it was to be able to show them the thin, crescent **Moon** and *all five naked-eye planets* in a single evening's observing, besides such deep-sky standbys and old favorites as **Orion Nebula (M42)**, the "37" cluster (**NGC 2169**) and **M37!**

For more important information about the planets, see "The Sky in April," pp. 4-5.

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Upcoming Meetings/Activities. Our club meeting will be at **7:30 p.m.** in the Beaverbrook media center on **Thurs., Apr. 8th**; **yr. editor** will talk about how to work your way through the 37 spring Messiers (which comprise a hefty 34% of the entire Messier list) in the easiest manner possible.

We won't have a Beaverbrook PTA observing in April.

Our Cox Field observings will be on **Fri.-Sat., Apr. 16th-17th**, and **Fri., Apr. 23rd.**

On **Sat., Apr. 24th**, we'll conduct an **Astronomy Day** day/night public observing in the parking lot of Kohl's Department Store in Fayetteville. (It's the site of one of our best-ever public observings two years ago.) The observing will begin at 4 p.m. with solar observing, and will continue with telescopic observing until about 10 p.m. when Kohl's closes.

To get to Kohl's from Griffin, follow Ga. Hwy. 92 (McIntosh Rd.) to Fayetteville, turn right at Ga. Hwy. 85 N in Fayetteville, and after about 3 mi. look for the massive **Fayetteville Pavilion** shopping complex on your left. Turn left onto the road through Pavilion, and Kohl's will be about ½ mi. on your left. It's the last store in that section, near the W end of the huge, E-W aligned shopping complex.

On **Fri., Apr. 30th**, FRAC will conduct an all-nighter for the American Cancer Society's "Relay For Life" walkathon at Spalding Co. H. S. on Griffin's south side. (You aren't expected to stay all night, of course: the walkathon will go from 7 p.m. Friday

evening until 8 a.m. on Sat. morning, but how long you stay will be strictly up to you.)

Last year's observing portion of the event was rained out for us, although the walkers forged steadily ahead in the rain all night (and, by all accounts, had themselves a ball doing so). We were at Spalding High two years ago and, as those of you who attended the event may recall, the area we were assigned was beside a dirt road and every time a car passed by huge clouds of red dust were raised. Well, this year we've been assured that we'll be able to set up our 'scopes within the grassy portion in or near the end zone at the S end of the field. We probably won't be able to park our cars there since the football coaches don't want their turf damaged, but we thought that carrying our 'scopes and equipment a short distance might be preferable to having to pressure-wash our mirrors and optics the next day to remove a night's heavy accumulation of dust.

To get to the school from, say, N of Griffin, come S on U. S. Hwy. 19/41 and stay on it until you reach the Ga. Hwy. 16 (Griffin/ Newnan) exit. Get off the 4-lane there, turn left onto Hwy. 16 and stay on that road all the way through Griffin. (Street signs will refer to it as Taylor St.)

After maybe 3 mi. you'll pass the Griffin-Spalding Co. Regional Library on the right, then go through a stoplight intersection and past Dairy Queen on the right. Stay on the main road past the point where a side road peels off to the right, and ½ mi. from the Dairy Queen you'll cross a RR track; 3/10 of a mile farther on you'll come to a green sign and arrow indicating the direction of Spalding Co. H. S. (i.e. to the right) at the next corner.

Turn right at that street – Wilson Road – continue past the stop sign at American Excelsior Co., and the school will appear almost immediately on the left beyond a small rise. Drive past the football field, turn left at the first intersection (Futral Road) and turn left again at the first road leading into the school property. We'll set up our 'scopes at the southern end of the football field (i.e., the end farthest from the school).

At **Dr. Richard Schmude's** suggestion at the March meeting, we're trying to schedule a further Astronomy Day observing event – a daytime solar observing for nursing home residents – but so far we

have been unable to solidify those plans due to difficulties in contacting the person responsible for making such decisions. The date we're suggesting is 3 p.m. on Sunday, Apr. 25th, and we'll let you know asap whether the event will go on, along with directions to the facility if it's a go.

Of course, the highlight of next month's Club Calendar will be FRAC's inaugural **Georgia Sky View 2004** star party, to be held on **Fri.-Sun, May 21st-23rd** at Camp McIntosh, 7 mi. S of Jackson, Ga. With a notice of the event appearing in the May '04 issue of *Sky & Telescope* (p. 124), outside interest in GSV is picking up considerably. Regardless of whether you plan to attend – and we hope you will, of course, for as long or as briefly as you can make it – you need to show your support for FRAC by filling out a registration form and sending it along with your check made out to FRAC c/o **Dawn Knight, 114 Central Lake Circle, Griffin, GA 30223.**

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This 'n That. From **Jamie Jenkins:** “Kudos to the FRAC crew that manned the public outreach at Futral Road Elementary School on March 23rd.”

“Unfortunately, we were unable to attend ourselves.

“My sister **Jennifer** wanted me to relate to FRAC that those in attendance tonight had a great time! My niece was in attendance for her school's session this evening. She was very impressed by the celestial spectacle she witnessed, as my sister had trouble getting her to leave, something that NEVER happens normally.

“To inspire young minds is always a worthwhile endeavor.”

*When asked to recount for this newsletter his recent attempt to burn down his telescope, **Dan Newcombe** replied: “Hmmm...Perhaps I should take some creative liberty and say that I was trying to save the Earth from an asteroid or something...”

“I was setting up something to do some solar projections on because I wanted to show my daughter some sunspots. As I went back to the garage to get something, I moved the 'scope so it wasn't pointed

directly at the Sun. I didn't want anyone to get blinded.

"I had moved it only a little bit, just getting the Sun out of the eyepiece. I guess some stray rays were bouncing off the mirror and heated up the plastic ring around the end of the sonotube. I looked over to gauge the height of a support I'd need for what I was gonna project the Sun onto, and saw smoke. All I could think of was, 'Uh-oh, I just pulled a **Steve**.'"

And then there was **Larry Fallin's** reaction to it, which effectively skewered both Dan and Steve: "*THE TORCH HAS PASSED!*"

*From **David Ward**: "Information is available on the FRAC website re the **Ga. Sky View 2004** door prizes, which include (among many other items): an f/8 Hardin 6-inch Deep Space Hunter Dobsonian telescope with finder, eyepieces, eyepiece rack, etc. – a \$300 value, direct from the factory; and a boxed set of "Real Sky North and South" software from the Astronomical Society of the Pacific, also direct from the factory.

If you are registered for **GSV 2004**, you are in the drawings. You need not be present to win, but you must claim and pick up your prize by 6 p.m. on Saturday, May 22nd. Any prizes that are not claimed by 6 p.m. will be forfeited and a redrawing will take place at 7 p.m. (You must be present at the redrawing to win.)

For more information about door prizes, see: http://www.flintriverastronomy.org/door_prizes.htm. Registration and tee shirt order forms can be found at: <http://www.flintriverastronomy.org/GSV2004.htm>

*From **Smitty**, responding to a question from **Doug Maxwell** regarding Doug's inability to pull up the Clear Sky Clock on our website: "The Clear Sky Clock (for Cox Field) has been down for awhile, but not due to their own problems. **Attila Danko** says he is going to change servers. Hopefully, by doing so this won't keep happening."

*As you may have noticed if you subscribe to *Astronomy* magazine, the April '04 issue contains an

article, "Introducing the Lunar 100" (pp. 113-120), by **Charles A. Wood**.

Although, like the A. L.'s Lunar Club, Mr. Wood's list contains many of the Moon's most prominent and interesting features, the two lists are by no means identical. The A. L. list is much easier and requires no understanding of what you're seeing (although such information obviously is important).

While the A. L. uses the enticement of a Lunar Club observing pin and certificate to get observers outside and observing the Moon, Mr. Wood's goal is educational: he wants us to not just find his 100 features, but to understand them as well. He provides a lunar map marking the location of his 100 targets, which have been listed from #1-100 in order of difficulty. (No. 1 on the list is the Moon itself). And to ensure our understanding of the features, "Forthcoming columns (in *Astronomy*) will provide detailed descriptions of each feature listed in the Lunar 100." (p. 120)

After briefly comparing the lists, we decided that the most outstanding Lunar Club feature that does not appear in Wood's Lunar 100 list is **Promontorium Heraclides**, a lofty point towering 5,900 ft. above (and overlooking) the Sinus Iridium plain. Wood compensates for that omission by including as his feature #2 **Earthshine**, which is seen just before or after the new moon when the Moon is a thin, sunlit crescent and the darkened portion of the Moon's disk is still faintly visible. Sometimes mistakenly thought to be due to light generated by the Earth, earthshine actually consists of *sunlight* that has been reflected from the Moon to the Earth and back to the Moon – similar in principle to the way that catadioptric telescopes bounce light rays around before delivering them to the eyepiece.

*We received a voice-mail in March from **Larry Higgins**, the guy who came up with the idea seven years ago of forming a local astronomy group and calling it the Flint River Astronomy Club. Larry said he was selling his telescope – an older model Orion 10-inch (f/5.6) Dob that **John Dobson** himself autographed several years ago – and all of his Sirius eyepieces as well, for just \$250. And that, we think,

is the best bargain price we've heard since **Phil Sacco** picked up an 8-inch SCT for \$50 about a decade ago.

As **Smitty** said regarding Larry's telescope, "I hope someone in FRAC picks this up, it's well worth the money."

If you're interested in purchasing a very good telescope for a great price, contact Larry at (770)233-6933.

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The Sky in April. If you're interested in observing **Uranus, Neptune** or **Pluto**, whether now or at any time during 2004, **Roger W. Sinnott** offers excellent finder charts and information about them in "Outer Planets in 2004" on pp. 106-7 of the April '04 issue of *Astronomy*. (Basically, mag. 5.9 Uranus can be found somewhere between 1/2 to 2-1/2 degrees from mag. 5 *Sigma Aqr*, and mag. 7.9 Neptune from 1/2 to 1-1/2 degrees from mag. 4 *Theta Cap*. Mag. 13.8 Pluto will be one of about a kazillion faint stars inside the triangle formed by *Nu, Eta* and *Xi Oph*; finding Pluto is somewhat akin to searching at night for a retaining screw from your focuser when it's fallen into the grass at Cox Field.)

More importantly, there is this from the Associated Press:

"Five planets are arrayed across the evening sky in a spectacular night show that won't be back for another three decades.

"For the next two weeks, **Mercury, Venus, Mars, Jupiter** and **Saturn** – the five closest planets – should be easily visible at dusk, along with the Moon.

"It's semi-unique," said **Myles Standish**, an astronomer at Jet Propulsion Laboratory in Pasadena, Calif. "They're all on the same side of the Sun and stretched across the sky and that's what is kind of pretty"...

"The planetary lineup will be visible to the naked eye every night for an hour after sunset from around the world through early April. At the end of the year, the same five planets will reunite for a few weeks, but in the pre-dawn hours.

"Standish said this particular planetary grouping may offer the best nighttime views until 2036.

"The orbits of the five planets take them to the same side of the Sun every few years or so. The conditions have to be just right for all five planets to be clearly visible at dusk or dawn; Mercury is often tough to catch. Even rarer are so-called alignments, where the planets are clustered together in the sky; this is not one of those.

"Stargazers should look to the western horizon just after sunset. Mercury, Venus, Mars and Saturn will be lined up in the sky with Jupiter close to the eastern horizon. They will span about 135 degrees. Saturn will be almost directly overhead."

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Observing Report: Scott Hammonds

Date: 4:30 p.m., Tues., Mar. 23, 2004

After getting good polar alignment last night with my German equatorial mount and Televue NP101, I decided to leave it set up overnight. This afternoon a few minutes ago I turned on the power and rescued the 'scope from the park position. I entered **Venus**, pressed GoTo, and presto!, there it was, a crescent shape centered in the eyepiece. *Cool!*, I thought.

Then the idea of trying for **Saturn** in the daytime crossed my mind, so I entered Saturn and pressed GoTo again. Bang!, there it was, very faint but definitely discernible, rings and all, right there in the eyepiece on a bright sunny day.

Ain't technology grand? For only a few "grand" I'm able to sky surf during the day as well as at night.

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