

# THE FLINT RIVER OBSERVER

Newsletter of the FLINT RIVER ASTRONOMY  
CLUB, an Astronomical League affiliate

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AlCor/Webmaster, **Tom Moore;** Ga. Sky View Coordinator, **Steve Bentley;** Observing Chairman/Public Observing Coordinator, **Dwight Harness;** Program Co-Chairmen, **Larry Higgins** and **Bill Warren;** NASA Contact, **Felix Luciano;** Event Photographer, **Tom Danei;** and Newsletter Editor, **Bill Warren.**

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Please notify **Bill Warren** if you have a change of home address, telephone no. or e-mail address.

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**Club Calendar. Sat., Apr. 3:** FRAC booth at the Bluebirds & Bluegrass Arts & Crafts Festival (9:00 a.m.-4:00 p.m., Dauset Trail); **Thurs., Apr. 8:** FRAC meeting (7:30 p.m., Stuckey Bldg. on the UGa-Griffin campus); **Fri.-Sat., Apr. 9-10:** Cox Field observings (at dark); **Fri.-Sat., Apr. 16-17:** Cox Field observings (at dark).

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**President's Message.** If you've already paid your 2010 FRAC dues – thanks a lot! You're a model citizen and a credit to your tax bracket. We appreciate

your desire to stay in FRAC. But if you haven't paid, please do so at your earliest convenience so you can remain a member in good standing and continue to receive the *Observer*. We don't send out renewal notices like the magazines do because in FRAC everyone's renewal date is the same, i.e., the last day of February.

While I'm on the subject of money, **Steve Bentley** says that registrations for **Ga. Sky View '10** are trickling in *verrrry* slowly. While that seems to be the rule rather than the exception most years, it's also somewhat disappointing because Steve has lined up a particularly excellent group of speakers for this year's event.

We profess to be proud of our star party. (I like to think of it – with apologies to **Burt Reynolds** and **Dolly Parton** – as “The Best Little Starhouse in Georgia.”) We get a lot of non-member registrants every year, but we need your support to make the event as good as it can be this year.

Think of it this way: *You're* one of the hosts. How good a party will it be if the hosts don't show up?

Or this way: The sooner you register, the sooner I'll quit nagging you about it.

I know you'll want to welcome FRAC's newest members, **Roger & Belinda Brackett** of West Point, Ga., and **Gary & Wendi Vermilion** of Seabrook, TX. We met Roger (but not Belinda) at our March meeting, and we hope that he was as impressed with us as we were with him. The Vermilions aren't likely to attend any meetings or observings since Texas is a long commute, but Wendi is my beautiful daughter and now she can keep up with what mischief her old man is up to every month. And who knows, maybe one of their kids – **Cheyene, Riana, Aidan & Dakota** – will become an astronomer someday.

-Bill Warren

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**Last Month's Meeting/Activities.** A nearly First Quarter Moon rode high in the sky over Cox Field on Feb. 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup>, but we didn't care – “we” being **Larry Higgins** and yr. editor (both nights), **Tom Danei** (the 19<sup>th</sup>) and **Charles Turner, Alan & Vicky**

**Pryor, Kevin Murdock** and his guest **Melissa Oliver** (the 20<sup>th</sup>). It was chilly: ice formed on Tom's telescope – but that's why people dress warmly in wintertime, isn't it? It was sooooo enjoyable to get out under the stars again with celestial and terrestrial old friends.

On Feb. 23<sup>rd</sup>, **Steve & Betty Bentley** did something rather unusual in terms of public outreach: they set up an astronomy booth at Hubbard Middle School's (Monroe Co.) "Career Day." Says Steve, "About 125 kids were there. Many organizations were represented, from the local karate club to Ga. Power Co. and the Ga. State Highway Patrol. Betty and I held our own with them, and we had good crowds at our table, which featured astronomy displays and handouts supplied by **Dr. Richard Schmude** of Gordon College." (*Richard couldn't attend the weekday event due to conflicts with his teaching schedule. –Ed.*)

After several cancellations and/or reschedulings at various schools, we finally got to conduct a public observing, this one at Jackson Road Elem. in Griffin, on Mar. 4<sup>th</sup>. **Dwight Harness, Tom Moore, Larry Higgins, Stephen Ramsden** and **yr. editor** showed the sky to about fifty 2<sup>nd</sup>-graders, their parents and teachers. There was light pollution, of course – school systems apparently see no need to install shields to deflect the glow of their security lights downward to where nocturnal intruders might be lurking – but the sky was clear, the temperatures mild, and we were able to show the attendees **Mars** and quite a few deep-sky objects.

A thank-you card, which contained a \$30 contribution to FRAC, also contained the following message: "Our students and teachers greatly appreciated your taking time to share the wonders of the night sky with us. Your knowledge of astronomy has enhanced our curriculum activities about the Moon, stars and our galaxy. Thank you for sharing your knowledge of astronomy with our second graders."

We've told the JRE teachers repeatedly that we charge no fees for conducting our public observings, but they have always included a monetary contribution with their thank-you cards. They are the only school that does that, and it is greatly

appreciated. They're a classy group at JRE; we always look forward to our visits, and we try very hard to make those observing as special for them as they are to us.

Fourteen FRACsters, including **Roger Brackett**, a new addition to our madcap menagerie of merrie misfits, attended our March meeting. Other attendees included: **Betty & Steve Bentley** and **Brianna Mills**; two long-time members we were glad to see again, **Doug Maxwell** and **Smitty**; **Dwight & Laura Harness**; **Larry Higgins**; **Charles Turner**; the two **Toms (Moore and Danei)**; **Jessie Dasher**; and **yr. editor**. Steve and yrs. truly showed the powerpoint program that they prepared and FRAC uses for our school presentations. Among other things, their presentation answered a burning question that doubtless has caused you many a sleepless night: *If you were to pack up the family car and take the wife and kids on a trip to **Neptune**, driving at a safe, sane speed of 55 mph so you wouldn't get a speeding ticket, how long would it take for you to get there?*

The answer is 5,800 years -- provided that you don't take a couple of side trips to **Jupiter** or **Saturn** along the way.

(And here one envisions **Dan Pillatzki** grabbing a pencil and paper, doing some quick figuring and announcing, "If my calculations are correct – which of course they are, since as a 14-year-old I received the Math Achievement Award in my 3<sup>rd</sup> grade class – a round trip to Neptune and back at that speed would take nearly **nine thousand** years!")

We had eight members at our Mar. 19<sup>th</sup> Cox Field observing: **Larry Higgins, Tom Moore, Steve & Betty Bentley, Carlos Flores, Jessie Dasher, Tom Danei** and **yr. truly**. It was chilly, of course – March didn't want to let go of winter without a fight – but otherwise it was the kind of observing evening we've been looking for for months. It was so clear that, when Tom D. got **Orion Nebula** in his new 18-in. 'scope, we could see six stars in the **Trapezium** – you know, the tiny quartet of baby stars in Orion's nest – instead of the customary four.

Two other firsts of sorts occurred when (1) we saw two horses grazing on the field, and (2) twice in a single evening satellites passed through Jessie's field of view while he was looking at something else. Such

an occurrence is roughly comparable to seeing two bolides (fireballs) in a single evening.

The next night, late afternoon clouds gave way to clear skies at The Cox, giving **Doug Maxwell, Dwight Harness, Larry H., yr. editor** and the two horses a chance for some long overdue deep-sky observing (the guys) and grazing (the horses).

On Mar. 24<sup>th</sup>, **Dwight Harness** conducted a solo presentation for ten 1<sup>st</sup>-graders at the Griffin-Spalding Enrichment Center. The kids were, he reports, extremely intelligent: one asked him, “What keeps the planets going around the Sun and not flying off into space?”

(“Aw, that’s nothing,” says **Dan Pillatzki**, “I asked the same question myself.” Well -- Yes, you did, Dan, but yours was at a club meeting a couple of months ago.)

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**This ‘n That. STEVE BENTLEY STRIKES AGAIN!** You’re gonna absolutely *love* this year’s **Ga. Sky View** tee shirt! It has the same extremely attractive graphics as last year’s model, but this year’s shirt has a feature that we’ve never seen in any other star party’s shirts, i.e., a pocket on the front left side with our logo on it. We’ve seen the layout and design mockup, and it’s nothing short of fabulous!

\*If you enjoy **Prof. Stargazer’s** occasional appearances in the *Observer* (see pp. 5-6) and our other ventures in astronomical nonsense, you might be interested in what other astronomy humor might be floating around the ethereal world of the internet.

In the Apr. ’10 issue of *Astronomy* (p. 56), **Glenn Chaple’s** article, “LOL Astronomy,” lists a number of sites (most of them devoted to astronomy-related cartoons) where you can find astronomy humor.

Chaple starts off with a joke: “*Question: A football player gets athlete’s foot. What does an astronaut get? Answer: Missile toe.*”

The two non-cartoon sites are:

<http://www.perseus.gr/Astro-Jokes.html> ; and <http://home.g-net/~andy/astrohum.htm> .

In the latter, you’ll find (among many other things) the official two funniest jokes in the world: the

winner is non-astronomical and the runnerup is – well, sort of astronomical.

As for humorous books on astronomy, the only one ever published is **Ken Fulton’s** *The Light-Hearted Astronomer* (Kalmbach, 1982). It’s out of print, but you can buy it used from amazon.com. It’s not as funny as Prof. Stargazer – at least, that’s what the professor says – but it’s an excellent little book for anyone who is interested in astronomy, whether a beginner or a veteran observer.

\*On the TV show “Deal Or No Deal,” there’s a guy in a darkened room above the set who is seen only in silhouette and heard from only when he calls emcee **Howie Mandel** to tell him how much he’ll give the contestant to accept his deal and quit playing the game.

That’s what long-time (but seldom seen) FRAC member **David O’Keeffe** is like. The only way we know he’s still there is when he sends in his annual dues or an occasional e-mail about something that’s going on somewhere in astronomy. And that’s a shame, too – not that we get e-mails from him, but that we don’t see or hear from him more often -- because David is a really great guy, and a lot of fun to be around. (Veteran FRACsters still chuckle at David’s telescope, which he carts around in a wooden box that looks very much like a casket.)

Anyway, David’s latest e-mail brought the exciting news that he and another Clayton Co. Public Schools bus driver recently were named **National Champions** in the 13<sup>th</sup> annual Special Needs Team Safety Roadeo held in Orlando, Fla., in March. Teams were scored on their ability to perform such items as a pre-trip inspection, proper care seat securement, wheelchair lift deployment, loading, and emergency evacuation.

David and his teammate, **Jacquelyn Turner**, scored 957 points (out of a possible 1,000 pts.) to earn 1<sup>st</sup> Place honors. They finished 20 pts. ahead of the runner-up team from New York.

Congratulations, David, from your friends in FRAC! It’s almost unheard of that someone you know is judged the best in the nation at what he does, and we’re very proud of your accomplishment. But we’d rather congratulate you in person at a meeting or observing.

\*An **Orrs Elementary School** Character Education update: The National Character Education Partnership (CEP) has named Orrs as one of twenty finalists. Orrs is one of only four schools in the southeastern U. S. to make it this far. (The other schools are in South Carolina [1] and Florida [2].)

A panel of judges will visit Orrs sometime in late March prior to announcing the national champion.

\*From **Alan Pryor**, regarding his recent business trip to Chile: “While I was in Chile in November I made many friends. Since the (mag. 8.8) ‘quake, we have not been able to reach any of them. Our prayers are with them.”

Ours too, Alan.

\*A couple of months ago, **Steve Bentley** said he’d heard that Orion Telescopes is coming out with a line of mega-telescopes with 36-, 40- and 50-in. mirrors. We thought he was kidding, or that he had dreamed it, but we mentioned in the *Observer* anyway. We thought it would be good for a laugh.

And maybe it was – but it’s not a joke.

According to the April issue of *Astronomy* (p. 38), for a paltry \$55,000.00 (including a 75% deposit), you can become the proud owner of a 36-in. f/4 Orion Dobsonian truss tube reflecting telescope equipped with “servoCAT tracking GoTo and Argo-Navis digital setting circles to automatically locate and track more than 29,000 celestial targets.”

Before you decide to (a) cash in your Roth IRA, (b) sell your stocks and bonds, (c) cash your 2010 tax refund checks and (d) take out third- and fourth-mortgages on your house to buy that ‘scope, however, you should know something: for just \$25,000.00 more, you can buy Orion’s new 40-in. f/4 Dob.

Eighty thousand dollars may seem like a bit much to spend for a telescope, but really: can you put a price tag or a dollar sign on the peace of mind and bragging rights that come from owning a telescope that’s twice as large as anybody else’s in FRAC? (At least, it will be until **Alan Pryor** or **Tom Danei** find out about your purchase and order Orion’s mega-monster 50-in. f/3.75 Dob for just \$123,000.)

\*Now that we have your attention regarding high-end spending, we’ll ask: *Are you tired of vacationing at the same old boring, been-there, done-that resorts in Hawaii, the Swiss Alps, the sun-drenched beaches of Rio or the Riviera or going on camera safaris in Africa?*

*Are you looking for a place where you can **really** get away from it all?*

If so, fret no more. Help is on the way.

Starting in 2012, for just **\$4.4 million dollars** a firm in Barcelona, Spain is offering the ultimate in around-the-world excursions: an 18-week vacation for four that includes eight weeks of training at a luxury resort on a tropical island, followed by ten weeks in space aboard the **Galactic Suite Space Resort**.

At the conclusion of your two-month training period amid tropical splendor, a Russian rocket will transport two astronaut-pilots and your party of four on a 1.5-day journey to the Space Resort. There, for nearly ten weeks, you’ll live like astronauts in a gravity-free environment. You’ll stay in connecting pods around a central hub, watching 15 sunrises and sunsets a day, sipping your meals through straws and wearing Velcro suits so you can crawl around your pod instead of bumping into things while floating.

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**Upcoming Meetings/Activities.** On **Sat., Apr. 3<sup>rd</sup>**, FRAC will have a booth at the Bluebirds & Bluegrass Arts & Crafts Festival held at Dauset Trail Wildlife Center. We’ll talk with hundreds of passersby about FRAC and astronomy, and show them the **Sun** through solar filters. We’d love to have you join us. The hours will be from 9 a.m.-4 p.m.

To get to Dauset Trail from, say, Jonesboro, come S on I-75 to Exit 205 (Ga. Hwy. 16, the Griffin-Jackson exit). Turn E toward Jackson, 10 mi. ahead.

Stay on Hwy. 16 through Jackson, and go straight on U. S. Hwy. 23/Ga. Hwy. 42 where Hwy. 16 branches off to the left. Then, a couple of miles ahead on 23/42, bear right on Hwy. 42 where Hwy. 23 goes straight. Go past both Indian Springs State Park entrances at Flovilla on Hwy. 42.

About 100 yds. beyond the 2<sup>nd</sup> ISSP entrance on the right, turn right at the flashing light at Mt. Vernon Church Road. That road goes Camp McIntosh a mile ahead, but instead of bearing to right to get to the camp, stay on Mt. Vernon Rd. as it curves to the left, and Dauset Trail will be a mile or so ahead on the right.

Our club meeting will be held at 7:30 p.m. in the Stuckey Bldg. on the UGa-Griffin campus. Our speaker, **Dr. Richard Schmude**, will show and tell us how to use spectroscopes to divide light into its component colors. And **GSV '10** coordinator **Steve Bentley** will briefly discuss the arrangements he's made for **Ga. Sky View 2010**, our weekend star party to be held on **May 13<sup>th</sup>-16<sup>th</sup>** at Camp McIntosh.

Our Cox Field club observings will be held on **Fri.-Sat., Apr. 9<sup>th</sup>-10<sup>th</sup>** and again on **Fri.-Sat., Apr. 16<sup>th</sup>-17<sup>th</sup>**.

We'll have more to say about this next month, but you should go ahead and reserve **Sat., May 1<sup>st</sup>** on your calendar as a special FRAC public observing date.

From 10 a.m.-2 p.m. on that date, we'll conduct indoor presentations and solar observing at **The Garden**, UGa-Griffin's breathtakingly beautiful garden facility located off Ellis Road in Griffin. **Stephen Ramsden** will run the show, but we'll need other FRAC solar 'scopes and members to help out with the refreshments we'll be serving to visitors.

Call it a belated Astronomy Day activity if you like – the official date for Astronomy Day is a week earlier – but by all means please plan to be there to help out with the festivities on May 1<sup>st</sup>. (And if you've never seen the UGa garden before, prepare to be blown away by the loveliness of it all.)

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**The Planets in April.** On Apr. 1<sup>st</sup>, **Venus** (mag. -4.5) and **Mercury** (mag. 1.2) will be just 3° – that's two finger-widths held against the sky – apart in the W sky 30 min. after sunset. (This will be your best chance to see Mercury all year.) On the 4<sup>th</sup>, Venus will be close to the **Pleiades**.

**Mars** (mag. 0.2) will be up in the SW sky in early evening. **Saturn** (mag. 0.7) will be up all night, its rings still mostly closed.

All of those planets are visible naked-eye, of course, but best seen in a telescope.

The **Lyrids meteor shower** will run from Apr. 16<sup>th</sup>-25<sup>th</sup>, so we should see a few early arrivals at Cox Field on the 16<sup>th</sup>-17<sup>th</sup>. It will peak before dawn on Apr. 22<sup>nd</sup>.

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**Excerpts from Prof. Stargazer's Runaway Best-Seller, CELESTIAL EXCUSES: 10,001 Reasons Why I Haven't Been to Cox Field Lately**

*(Editor's Note: Parts of this article [including the amended title] were adapted from an article that appeared several years ago in the Observer.)*

Get the picture, as legendary Georgia Bulldogs football announcer **Larry Munson** used to say:

You're walking down an aisle in WalMart, looking for a new thribbet for your gromulator.

Suddenly, you look up to see a guy staring at you, grinning. He looks vaguely familiar, like someone you ought to know. But *who?*

Before you can put a name to a face, though, he walks over and extends a hand, expecting you to shake it so you do.

"Hi," he says. "Long time no see."

"Uh, yeah," you mumble, thinking furiously. *Who is this guy, and where do I know him from? What's his name? I hope I don't owe him money!* But with his next words, his name becomes the least of your worries.

"We've missed seeing you at Cox Field lately," he says.

*Uh-oh.* Things have gone from bad to worse.

Your mind is racing but going nowhere, like it's stuck on a treadmill. "Uh – I've been – that is, my wife – I mean – Uh, you know, we – I – that is, uh..."

If that's ever happened to you, **Prof. Stargazer** feels your pain. I've been known to forget things occasionally, as my landlord or parole officer would tell you. So here, without further ado, are some of the

10,001 excuses I've used to explain my occasional absences from Cox Field observings:

### Seasonal Excuses: Spring and Summer

\*Excuse #9,736: I'm allergic to pollen, ragweed, hay, freshly mowed grass, fire ants, bee stings, snakebites and my brother-in-law and his bratty kids.

\*Excuse #9,201: The dew heater that keeps my eyeglasses from fogging up isn't working. Anyway, when it *was* working, I kept tripping over the wires that connect to the car battery I use to power it.

\*Excuse #8,094: I've been too upset to go anywhere since Maximilian and Ludmila were eliminated from "Dancing With the Stars."

\*Excuse # 7,736: I ran out of bug spray. My red LED flashlight needs batteries. The North Koreans refused to sign the nuclear test ban treaty. I'm worried sick because they still haven't found Osama bin Ladin. Pick one.

\*Excuse # 7,401: The air conditioner in my car isn't working.

\*Excuse # 6,170: I'm afraid I'll get West Nile virus, ebola, malaria, cholera, the bubonic plague, dysentery, rabies, scurvy, rickets, athlete's foot, dandruff, hemorrhoids, psoriasis or something else if I go outdoors.

\*Excuse # 5,527: We were going on vacation and I had already packed the car.

### Fall and Winter

\*Excuse # 4,884: I didn't want to miss the PBS fall fund drive telethon. It's the only time all year that they show the good programs.

\*Excuse #3,807: I saw **Andromeda Galaxy** and **Orion Nebula** last year. By all accounts, they haven't changed much.

\*Excuse # 3,101: I put too much starch in my camo suit, and it makes me walk like **Artoo Detoo** in "Star Wars."

\*Excuse # 2,300: I was waiting at home to see if we won a million dollars in the Publisher's Clearinghouse Sweepstakes.

\*Excuse #1,671: The heater in my car isn't working. (Neither is my brother-in-law and his family

from Schenectady who are living with us until he gets the ankle monitor removed, but that's another story.)

\*Excuse #1,495: I was afraid my telescope would ice over. Or I would.

### General Excuses

\*Excuse # 1,142: I've been afraid of the dark ever since I watched "Halloween."

\*Excuse #948: I just washed my telescope, and I can't do a thing with it.

\*Excuse # 721: My solar-powered car won't run at night.

\*Excuse #568: My car wouldn't start. The battery is fine, but I left the car keys in my pocket when I washed clothes, and they shrank.

\*Excuse #479: With movies like "Armageddon," "Deep Impact" and "2012", I'm afraid of getting hit by an asteroid or a meteor.

\*Excuse #333: The weatherman predicted rain somewhere.

\*Excuse #317: My wife used my *Deep Map 600* to line the bottom of the birdcage.

\*Excuse #265: My wife's nephew's second cousin's husband's sister's uncle by marriage died at age 95. We wanted to be present when his will was read because you never know, the old buzzard might have left us something.

\*Excuse #162: My cat is gonna have kittens any day now. (We thought she was a male and named her Ben, but now we've changed her name to Ben Her.)

\*Excuse #145: My wife is using the struts of my truss-tube Newtonian telescope to hold up the clothesline.

\*Excuse # 26: Cox Field is, let us say, off the beaten path. Did you see the movie "Deliverance"?

And the #1 reason why I haven't been to a Cox Field observng lately: I'm doing my observng at home now. They just opened a nudist colony next door.

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