

THE FLINT RIVER OBSERVER

NEWSLETTER OF THE FLINT
RIVER ASTRONOMY CLUB

An Affiliate of the
Astronomical League

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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. **Thurs., Mar. 29:** UGa-Griffin lunar observing (7-10:00 p.m.); **Sat., Apr. 7:** Bluebirds & Bluegrass Festival (Dauset Trail Nature Center, Flovilla, GA., 8 a.m.-4 p.m.); **Thurs., Apr. 12:** FRAC meeting (7:30 p.m., Rm. 219 of the Flynt Bldg., UGa-Griffin Campus); **Fri., Apr. 20:** Cox Field observing (at dark); **Sat., Apr.**

21: Kurtz Rock observing (at dark); **Thurs., Apr. 26:** UGa-Griffin public lunar observing (7-10 p.m.).

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President's Message. Another action-packed, laid-back, fun-filled **Georgia Sky View** star party has come and gone, and I want to thank **Steve Knight** and everyone who attended and helped to make it such a thoroughly delightful weekend. We wound up with 37 paying registrants and, thanks largely to **Betty & Steve Bentley's** untiring work in the kitchen, we actually managed to net a tidy profit from the event.

-Bill Warren

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Last Month's Meeting/Activities. **Aaron Calhoun** and **yr. editor** had a grand old time observing on Feb. 17th. We tracked down a huge variety of objects bright, faint, familiar and elusive under the kind of dark, clear skies that Cox Field is famous for.

On Feb. 25th, **Dwight & Laura Harness, Tom Moore** and **yrs. truly** talked about astronomy, the universe and FRAC before a crowd of about 55 Griffin Civil Air Patrol members and their parents. Afterward, we were joined outside by **Larry Higgins, Ben & Woody Jones, Charles Turner** and **Steve Knight** for 90 min. of observing. Including walkers at the airport walking track, we showed the wonders of the winter night sky to about 75 people.

Seventeen members and a visitor enjoyed **Aaron Calhoun's** excellent talk on "Orion" at our March meeting. Attendees included: Aaron; **Betty & Steve Bentley;** **Mike Stuart;** **Carlos Flores;** **Charles "Prince of Darkness" Turner;** **Tom Moore;** **Joseph Auriemma;** **Woody & Ben Jones;** **Cynthia Armstrong;** **Dwight Harness;** **Chris & Bagitta Smallwood;** **Jessie Dasher;** **Felix Luciano;** **yr. editor;** and Griffin visitor **Greg Baugh.**

March 13th was a busy day for FRAC. **Alan Pryor** conducted a lunchtime powerpoint presentation for about 25 members of the Paulding Co. Rotary Club; and that same evening, **Dwight & Laura Harness** and **Tom Moore** showed the sky to a large group of students and parents at Jackson Road Elementary School in Griffin. In appreciation for their efforts, the school donated \$30 to FRAC. It was a classy gesture by a great bunch of folks at JRE.

Twenty-five FRAC members attended **Ga. Sky View 2012: Larry Higgins; Steve & Betty Bentley** and their granddaughters **Brianna & Erin Mills; Dwight & Laura Harness; Steve, Angela & Ashlet Knight; Felix Luciano; Alan Pryor; Stephen “Smitty” Smith; Doug Maxwell; Joe Auriemma; Charles “Prince of Darnkess” Turner; Erik Erikson; Tim & Diane Cunard; Art & Maria Zorka; Phil Sacco; Dr. Richard Schmude;** and dragging up the rear (literally), **yrs. truly**. Folks, we wouldn't have had nearly as good a time without you. Thanks again from Steve Knight and everyone in FRAC.”

Give the meteorologists a D- grade for forecasting bad weather throughout our GSV weekend. Thurs. night was cloudy but we still got about 90 min. under starry skies; Fri. night was crystal clear from dusk till dawn, and Sat. night was mostly clear. We had short-sleeve weather throughout, and all 40 attendees thoroughly enjoyed each other's company. Things ran so smoothly that Steve Knight was able to drag out the Frankenscope for some viewing.

Said Greenville's **Jim Stratton:** “Thanks to all of the FRAC team for hosting a fun star party once again. The food and folks were great as always, and the weather fared in our favor as well.”

We renewed our monthly UGa-Griffin lunar observings on Mar. 29th. FRAC attendees **Steve & Betty Bentley, Tom**

Moore, Charles Turner, Dwight Harness and **yrs. truly**.

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This ‘n That. **Laura Harness** is playing on the varsity tennis team at Griffin High School, and **Dan Pillatzki's** daughter **Megan** is playing varsity soccer at Luella H. S. in Hampton. To paraphrase **Mark Knopfler**, lead singer for Dire Straits, “Oh yeah, the girls can play!”

***Images of GSV '12.**

1. **Phil Sacco** and **Art Zorka** are excellent speakers, as everyone knows. But they were neatly upstaged by three guests they brought with them, i.e., a trio of lovely *green-cheeked conures* (think: miniature parrots) that, with their tail feathers clipped, pranced around the tabletops and on people's shoulders and heads as if they owned the place. **Olive, Jules & Chili** were as lovely as **Larry Higgins** wasn't.

2. At around 4 a.m. on Sat. morning, the battery for **Doug Maxwell's** 18-in. telescope was running low. As he worked on it, wires got crossed and suddenly Doug's 'scope was gyrating wildly, thrashing and jerking this way and that as if possessed – and there were bystanders **Jeremy & Cory Schiffer** dancing with it, doing a mean Monkey like go-go dancers on a '60s TV dance show. The only things missing were the Beatles singing “Twist and Shout,” and someone to record the event for posterity.

Such moments of inspired hilarity are part and parcel of every **Ga. Sky View**; they help to explain why every **GSV** is an unforgettable experience.

*Oops, anyone?

While packing up his 'scope and equipment at the conclusion of the **CAP** observing, **yr. fumble-fisted editor** stepped on his new prescription glasses. Luckily, he wasn't wearing them at the time.

Then, while packing his gear for GSV, he took his car keys out of his pocket – and with them came one of his hearing aids. Hello concrete, goodbye hearing aid.

Says yr. editor: “If I haven’t dropped you a line recently – well, it’s the only thing I haven’t dropped!”

*The event: **The 8th Annual Tennessee Spring Star Party**. Time: **Fri.-Sun., April 20th-22nd**. Location: Fall Creek Falls State Park near Pikeville, TN. Data: With no registration fee, your only expenses will be gas, lodging and meals. Speakers and vendors will be present on Sat. morning from 10 a.m.-4 p.m. The observation field is not a designated camping area for tents, travel trailers or RVs; instead, FCFSP offers an inn, cabins and an area for large group camping.

For more information, go to www.cumberlandastronomicalsociety.org, or contact **Allen Ball** at tnscoper@gmail.com.

***Art Zorka** wants to organize a multi-club day trip or overnight visit to the Huntsville, AL space center sometime in the coming months. He envisions the trip including a guided tour of the facility and possibly an observing that evening for those who would like to stay overnight. Attendees would be drawn from the Atlanta Astronomy Club, its Charlie Elliott affiliate chapter, and, of course, FRAC.

If you think you might like to participate, you can find out more about it by contacting Art at artzorka@yahoo.com.

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Upcoming Meetings/Activities. On **Sat., Apr. 7th**, FRAC will operate an astronomy booth and conduct solar observations at the Bluebirds & Bluegrass Festival at the Dauset Trail Nature Center near Indian Springs State Park. It will run from 8 a.m.-4 p.m.,

and we’ll send out directions prior to the event.

Our club meeting will be at 7:30 p.m. on **Thurs., Apr. 12th**, in Rm. 219 of the Flynt Bldg. on the UGa-Griffin campus. We’ll watch more of **Carl Sagan’s** unforgettable *Cosmos* PBS series.

Our Cox Field observing will be on **Fri., Apr. 20th**, and our Kurtz Rock observing on the following evening, **Sat., Apr. 21st**. We’ll send out directions to both sites prior to that weekend.

We’ll close out April with a UGa-Griffin public lunar observing on **Thurs., Apr. 26th**. The public is cordially invited to attend – and so are you. Whether the crowds are large or small, we always have a grand time at those get-togethers. The only way we’d have more fun would be for you to join us.

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See yonder fire! It is the Moon
Slow rising o’er the eastern hill.
It glimmers in the forest tips,
And through the dewy foliage drips
In little rivulets of light,
And makes the heart in love with
night.

-Henry Wadsworth Longfellow
The Golden Legend, 1851

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The Sky in April. **Saturn** (mag. 0.3) will lie near **Spica (Alpha Virginis)** in mid-April, its rings the widest they’ve been in five years. Like **Mars** (mag. -0.4) and insomniacs, Saturn will be up all night.

Jupiter (mag. -2.0) will be visible low in the W sky during the first 3 weeks of April. **Venus** (mag. -4.6) will be visible after sunset all month.

The **Lyrids meteor shower**, peaking on the evening of Apr. 22nd, will produce about a meteor every 2-3 minutes. With virtually no moonlight visible to bleach out the meteors, it should be a good evening for

meteor watching. The radiant, or point from which Lyrids meteors appear to be coming, will be near **Vega (Alpha Lyrae)**.

Spring has returned at long last, and with it comes a bevy of star patterns and asterisms referred to in yr. editor's 2-part series that concludes this month: **Scorpius, the Scorpion**; kite-shaped **Bootes**; the semicircular tiara of **Corona Borealis**; **Leo** and its **Sickle**, or backward question mark; the V-shaped wizard's hat that forms **Coma Berenices (Berenice's Hair)**; the **Butterfly Cluster (M6)** in **Scorpius**; the **Beehive** open cluster (**M44**) in **Cancer**; and STAR asterisms **Stargate (#20)** in **Corvus**; **Jaws (#21)** in **Virgo**; the **Sailboat (#6)** in **Leo Minor**; and the **Broken Engagement Ring (#19)** in **Ursa Major**.

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STAR PATTERNS AND ASTERISMS:

Part Two

by Bill Warren

Telescopic Asterisms

***NGC 457**, the **Owl (or E. T.) Cluster** in *Cassiopeia*, is identifiable by two bright yellow "eyes" at its N end. They dominate the low-power field of view and orient you to the pattern of an owl with its wings spread in flight. Some observers have seen this distinctive star pattern as E. T., the Extraterrestrial, or else as a dragonfly, a butterfly or a swept-wing jet fighter plane.

The cluster contains about 40 stars, and is nicely separated from its surrounding star field.

*The V-shaped leading edge of the splendid open cluster **M11** in *Scutum* has been likened to a flock of its namesakes in the **Wild Duck Cluster**. The "V" is easily seen at low power, and less evident at high magnifications. Still, this lovely cluster

merits both views, with over 100 stars packed together like a loose globular cluster. **M11** is one of the finest open clusters in the night sky.

*The **Six of Dominoes** is a tiny but attractive little asterism in *Cassiopeia*. More familiarly known as **Trumpler I**, it was unofficially – but accurately – named by FRAC's own **Felix Luciano**, who saw its two nearly parallel rows of brightest stars as resembling a domino tile. Those stars are instantly recognizable as Felix's domino among about 25 other, fainter stars in the little open cluster.

***NGC 2264**, an open cluster in *Monoceros*, is better known as the **Christmas Tree Cluster**. Its stars form limbs spreading out on either side of the tree, the brightest star lying at the base. (And unseen unless you're using an H-beta filter, immediately adjacent to the star at the top of the tree lies **Cone Nebula**, a famous dark nebula.)

Two other open clusters resemble Christmas trees: **M103** in *Cassiopeia* and **NGC 2362**, the **Tau Canis Major Cluster**.

NGC 2169 in *Orion* forms an unmistakable – and unforgettable – number combination – thus, its familiar name, the **37 Cluster**. It looks like half of a basketball scoreboard with a few bulbs burned out.

"STAR" Asterisms

Phil Harrington, who writes monthly columns for *Astronomy Magazine*, is an asterisms junkie. Phil has compiled a list of 29 "STAR (Small Telescope Asterism Roster)" asterisms, a few of which he discovered but mostly others that were suggested to him. Some of the best-known STARS include:

***Kemble's Cascade** (STAR 3) in *Camelopardalis*. Named for its discoverer, the late Canadian Franciscan friar and amateur astronomer **Lucian Kemble**, the Cascade is a 2.5° chain of about 25 NE-SW

oriented stars that ends at a little open cluster, **NGC 1502**. Kemble likened it to “a waterfall ending in a pool.”

*The **Golf Putter** (STAR 15) in *Cassiopeia*. This large asterism looks more like a hockey stick than a putter. But with four mag. 6-7 stars forming the 1-1/2° shaft, a little triangle of stars forming the putter’s head and the bright open cluster **NGC 752** forming the golf ball, the “Putter” designation isn’t at all far-fetched.

***Kemble’s Kite** (STAR 20) in *Cassiopeia*. The prolific Fr. Kemble’s 6-star kite sports a 4-star tail, unlike other kite- or diamond-shaped star patterns.

***Pakan’s 3** (STAR 18) in *Monoceros*. Named for another Canadian observer, **Randy Pakan**, this asterism features 15 mag. 9-10 stars forming a large number **3**.

***Stargate** (STAR 20) in *Corvus*. Named by the A.L.’s **John Wagoner**, this stunning little 6-star triangle-within-a-triangle is quite possibly the most attractive star grouping in the night sky. The triangles are equilateral, and offset to each other with geometric precision.

*The **Mini-Coathanger** (STAR 22) in *Ursa Minor*. Bearing a striking resemblance to its larger, brighter namesake, the Mini-Coathanger is 1/2° in dia., its 11 stars forming an immediately recognizable 8-star crossbar and 3-star hook.

*The **Backward S** (STAR 23) in *Hercules* features 13 mag. 7-11 stars forming the asterism’s name. The “**S**” is not as large, bright or symmetrically pleasing as the **Orion S** -- but it *is* an “S”, and that’s no b.s.

*The **Little Queen** (STAR 25) in *Draco* looks like *Cassiopeia the Queen*, only without the bend in the “**W**”. The 5-star pattern is bright enough to be seen in binoculars from a dark site.

Other STAR asterisms with fanciful names require somewhat more imagination to “see”: the **Sailboat** (STAR 6) in *Leo*

Minor; the **Airplane** (STAR 12) in *Cassiopeia*; the **Queen’s Kite** (STAR 13) in *Cassiopeia*; **Davis’s Dog** (STAR 16) in *Taurus*; the **Unicorn’s Horn** (STAR 17) in *Monoceros*; the **Broken Engagement Ring** (STAR 19) in *Ursa Major*; **Jaws** (STAR 21) in *Virgo*; and the **Red-Necked Emu** (STAR 26) in *Cygnus*.

For more information (or finding instructions) regarding the STAR asterisms, see Harrington’s books *Touring the Universe Through Binoculars* (NY: Wiley, 1990) and *The Deep Sky: An Introduction* (Cambridge, MA: Sky Publishing, 1997). While neither book discusses all 29 of the STAR asterisms, *Deep Sky* describes 21 of them, offers photos or drawings of some, and locates them on star charts at the back of the book.

Conclusion

The very nature of asterisms suggests that there is not, and can never be, a complete list of them. The list will continue to expand as long as humans with imaginations observe the night sky. This report has been limited to some of the best-known and important star patterns and asterisms.

I hope that my article has stirred a desire within you to go out and see for yourself how fascinating asterisms can be. I’m an asterisms freak, and if you give them a try, you may become one, too. You don’t need a big telescope, or even binoculars, to get started. That’s why I devoted so much space in this article to constellations and naked-eye star patterns.

And if I’ve whetted your appetite to go beyond the 65 star patterns and asterisms I’ve mentioned here – well, as I said earlier, finding asterisms is an ongoing process. The list is always expanding. For example, in the Mar. ’12 issue of *Sky & Telescope* (p. 63), **Sue French** refers to the open cluster

Trumpler 9 in *Puppis* as the Greater Than One Cluster.

To find out more about asterisms than I've mentioned here, just Google "Asterisms" and go for it. Wikipedia is an excellent source of information, and two other excellent sites I've found on the web are "Asterisms – The Night Sky Atlas" at www.nightskyatlas.com/asterisms.jsp and "David Ratledge's Virtual Home" at www.deepsky.co.uk/asterisms.htm. The former lists 109 star patterns and asterisms and contains photos and finder charts; the latter contains 31 asterisms (including 13 STARS) with excellent photos of each of them.

Finally, the best book on asterisms available today is **John Chiravelle's** *Pattern Asterisms: A New Way to Chart the Stars* (from **Sir Patrick Caldwell-Moore's** Practical Astronomy Series). You can get it used from amazon.com for just \$1.99.

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Prof. Stargazer Goes to the Movies

Once again, the *Observer* proudly presents an interview with **Prof. Theophilus Stargazer**, the world's leading authority on black holes, white dwarfs and blue movies. FRAC members recently asked the colorful professor about movies involving space and science fiction.

Joe Auriemma: How did you like the movie "Contact"?

Prof. Stargazer: I was disappointed. Oh, I liked the movie's Search for Extraterrestrial Intelligence story line – but having just watched my favorite space movie ("Voluptuous Vixens of Venus"), I was expecting a different kind of contact.

Mike Stuart: What about the sci-fi classic "Alien"?

Prof. Stargazer: They advertised that "In space, no one can hear you scream." Then why could we hear the spaceship's engines?

Larry Higgins: What did you think of **Arthur C. Clarke's** "2001"?

Prof. Stargazer: What does it say when the movie's best actors are a bunch of hairy, grunting hominids gathered around a black obelisk? It looked like an observing at Cox Field.

Woody Jones: Did you see the sequel, "2012"?

Prof. Stargazer: No, but you gotta admit, those ancient Mayans knew things that we don't know today -- such as where to find a fast-food drive-through that will get your order right.

Actually, they didn't know that – no one does -- but they *did* invent the number **zero**, which the ancient Greeks didn't have. Among other things, that discovery has made it possible for today's baseball teams to have scoreless innings.

Steve & Aimee Mann (simultaneously): Have you seen "Cowboys and Aliens"?

Prof. Stargazer: Have I seen it? Man, I *wrote* it! But they changed the names of my characters. In my script, the cowboy with the metal device attached to his arm was an English samurai named Pyoo Hoo Brokewind, and his girlfriend was an Oriental named Twernt Mee.

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Errata: **The Lozenge** is a naked-eye (not binocular) asterism that forms the head of *Draco, the Dragon*.

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