

THE FLINT RIVER OBSERVER

NEWSLETTER OF THE FLINT
RIVER ASTRONOMY CLUB

An Affiliate of the Astronomical League

Vol. 15, No. 1 March, 2011

Officers: President, **Bill Warren:** (770)229-6108, warren7804@bellsouth.net; Vice President, **Larry Higgins;** Secretary-Treasurer, **Steve Bentley.**

Board of Directors: **Dwight Harness; Tom Moore; Mike Stuart;** and **Jessie Dasher.**

Alcor/Webmaster, **Tom Moore;** Ga. Sky View Coordinator, **Steve Bentley;** Observing Coordinator, **Dwight Harness;** NASA Contact, **Felix Luciano;** Scouting Coordinator: **Steve Knight;** Event Photographer, **Tom Danei;** and Newsletter Editor, **Bill Warren.**

Club mailing address: 1212 Everee Inn Rd., Griffin, GA 30224. Web page: www.flintriverastronomy.org.

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

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Club Calendar. Tues., Mar. 1: Jackson Road Elementary School observing (7:00 p.m.); **Fri.-Sat., Mar. 4-5:** Cox Field observings (at dark); **Thurs., Mar. 10:** FRAC meeting (7:30 p.m, Rm. 305, Flint Bldg., UGa-Griffin campus); **Fri., Mar. 11:** UGa-Griffin lunar observing (7-10 p.m., front lawn); **Wed., Mar. 16:** Crescent Elementary School science club presentation (2:30-3:30 p.m.).

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President's Message. On behalf of our officers and board members, I want to thank you for your support in electing – or reelecting, as the case may be – **Bill Warren**, president; **Larry Higgins**, vice president; **Steve Bentley**, secretary-treasurer; and **Dwight Harness, Tom Moore, Jessie Dasher** and **Mike Stuart**, board of directors -- at the Feb. meeting. Call us *The Undertakers*: we'll be the last ones to let you down.

Even in a small club like FRAC, it takes a lotta work by a lotta folks to make a club as successful as FRAC has been. I try to thank you whenever possible, and to whatever extent I fail in that regard it's not because I don't appreciate your help. Your ongoing membership attests to FRAC's broad appeal.

Groucho Marx once said, "I don't want to belong to any club that would accept me to be a member." I think even Groucho would have been proud to be in FRAC.

I recently managed to be excused from jury duty by virtue of my hearing problems. Can you imagine me as a juror in a murder trial, interrupting the proceedings to ask, "Excuse me, Judge. Did he just say he was innocent of killing the guy? Or did he say he was in a sense filling the sky?"

By incredible coincidence, **Steve Knight** was selected for jury duty at the same time I was, but Steve has better hearing than I do. (Hey, Steve, you shoulda done what I did and stick a pencil in your ear!)

Finally, here's a big "WELCOME TO FRAC!" for our newest member, **Bill Kurtz** of Alvaton. He's a good man, you're gonna like him.

-Bill Warren

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Last Month's Meeting/Activities. Abundant rain and cold weather cancelled out our first Feb. Cox Field observing. The following night, however, the weather was cold but the skies were uncommonly clear and steady over The Cox. Unfortunately, only two FRACsters – **Tim Cunard** and **yrs. truly** – showed up. We stayed till midnight, and the skies cooperated beautifully.

You know how, when you use a laser pointer at night, you can see dust particles drifting across the beam? Not that night. It was as nearly perfect seeing as we've encountered in the past fifteen years.

Incidentally, while at Cox Field Tim was tuned to a satellite 24-hr. all-astronomy programming station. You can get it on the web at astronomy.fm/rad.

We had twenty members (including new member **Bill Kurtz**) at our Feb. birthday party/officer election meeting. Others present included: **Steve & Betty Bentley** and **Brianna & Erin Mills**; **Dwight & Laura Harness**; **Steve Knight**; **Charles Turner**; **Tom Moore**; **Carlos Flores**; **Larry Higgins**; **Mike Stuart**; **Chris & Bagitta Smallwood**; **Jessie Dasher**; **Steven "Smitty" Smith**; **Sam Harrell**; **Dr. Richard Schmude**; and **yr. editor**. Steve Knight delivered an excellent presentation on how FRAC's new Facebook social networking site works, and how our members can use the site. Betty's cakes were just so-so (as in "They were so – So delicious that I ate four slices!"). They provided the perfect exclamation point for an excellent evening.

Eight members and about 250 children, parents and teachers attended the recent Daughtry Elem. School science night observing in Jackson, Ga. FRAC attendees included: **Tim Cunard**, **Dwight Harness**, **Rick Staylor**, **Betty & Steve Bentley**, **Tom Moore**, **Larry Higgins** and **yrs. truly**. The weather was perfect, and in her thank-you note school coordinator **Genie Adams** wrote, "I'm not sure who enjoyed it more – the kids or the adults! You were a HIT!" She said she hoped we'd want to make it an annual affair. And we will, too: it's amazing how far FRAC members will drive for free pizza with gas prices presently hovering around \$3.40 a gallon!

Several of us went early to enjoy a meal at Fresh Air BBQ near Indian Springs, and Dwight still found room later to eat a slice or six of free pizza at the school. But that's okay, because he's eating for two. (No, he's not PG, he's feeding his tapeworm.)

Moving even farther into the realm of fiction, yr. editor told Dwight that one of the teachers asked us who the guy was who kept pushing kids out of the way to go back for seconds and thirds. Dwight said, "Hey, it wasn't *my* fault that that wheelchair kid's brake got stuck!"

(And if you believe any of that except the part about Fresh Air BBQ, can we interest you in some prime oceanfront property in the Okefenokee Swamp?)

On Feb. 19th, five fearless FRACsters – **Dwight Harness**, **Steve Knight**, **Tom Moore**, **Larry Higgins** and **yr. editor** – took our telescopes to a church in northern Spalding Co. to conduct an observing for about 15 cub scouts and their parents. Under cloudy skies, Steve took out his telescope to collimate it. Then, after doing that, he decided to try to show the kids **Jupiter** whenever it peeked through the clouds.

The operant word here is "try", since neither the sky nor the scouts were cooperative. Steve did as good a job as could be done under the circumstances, but the kids were loud, wild and unruly. Their parents were either unable or unwilling to control their running around and chasing each other in the dark.

That happens occasionally, and it makes for a very forgettable evening. It's less likely to occur at school observings because children tend to recognize their teachers as authority figures.

There's no connection between children's behavior and the Full Moon – although teachers everywhere will tell you differently –but fact remains: on the day of the observing, the **Moon** was one day past full.

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This 'n That. Just a reminder: If you haven't paid your 2011 FRAC dues, they became due for renewal in February. If you haven't already done so, you can send your \$15 check (made out to FRAC) to: **Bill Warren, 1212 Everee Inn Road, Griffin, GA 30224.**

(Incidentally, if you've ever wondered why we have a universal dues date rather than having everyone pay on the anniversary of their joining, here's why: it simplifies the paperwork, and it's easier to remind everyone at the same time than to deal with dues on an individual basis the way we used to do it.

And if you've ever wondered why our dues date is February, there are two reasons: our inaugural FRAC meeting was held in Feb., 1997; and when we decided to adopt a universal dues payment deadline, **Smitty**

wisely pointed out that, with Christmas bills still fresh in our minds and pocketbooks, January wouldn't be a good time to ask members for money.

*Thanks to **Steve Knight**, FRAC now has a Facebook site. Give it a look-see and sign up.

***Tom Moore** recently sent out a link to the Smithsonian Channel's website that featured a wonderful 1-1/2-min. video interview with daughter **Katie**. That interview was one of five brief "Interview with the Expert" videos featuring Women in Science. (Katie's was by far the best, of course.)

As you know, Katie is the lead Astronomy Educator at the Smithsonian Air & Space Museum in Washington, D. C., and she runs the Public Observing Program in the Observatory at the museum.

*From our "**Not Every Solution to Every Problem in Astronomy Costs Hundred\$ of Dollar\$**" Dept., there is this: Faced with a backyard light pollution problem, **Tim Cunard** solved it by mounting a cardboard square on a long pole and leaning it against the offending light fixture while he's observing.

*At our Daughtry Elem. observing, **Rick Staylor** unveiled his new 18-in. Meade Lightbridge truss tube telescope. It was, as you might have guessed, a terrific telescope. Rick, as yet unprepared to handle setting up the 'scope's GoTo, had rigged up a PVC pipe connection for his laser pointer in finding **Jupiter**. Worked like a charm, and no airline pilots were blinded in the process.

*We recently got a phone call from everyone's favorite cookskin cap guy at Ga. Sky Views, **Gary Heedick**. We asked Gary if he ever got an astronomy club started in Milledgeville, and he said that No, the interest wasn't there. It's unfortunate (and somewhat surprising), given that there's a college in town and the college undoubtedly has a science dept.

It reminded yr. editor, too, of how fortunate all of us in FRAC are to have had a **Larry Higgins** living in the Griffin area who believed that an astronomy club

could be formed and survive within the enormous shadow cast by the Atlanta Astronomy Club.

*February also brought us **Dr. David King's** annual *Wetumpka Impact Crater Newsletter*. He wrote that, for the first time, his Wetumpka research group received some financial backing from NASA. The money was used to drill four new core holes in the crater, which has led to the most precise dating yet of the impact event: 84.4 million years ago, give or take **Ken Walburn's** age.

*In 2004, an 875-ft.-long asteroid, **99942 Apophis** (pronounced: Uh PAH fess) made headlines when NASA scientists announced that there was a good chance that Apophis would hit the Earth in 2029. As it turned out, the announcement was premature: subsequent number-crunching by the folks who do that sort of thing for a living showed that the asteroid would miss our planet by 18,300 miles. NASA retracted its grim prediction.

Well, Apophis is back in the news.

Russian scientists recently announced that, while *Yes*, it's true that Apophis will miss us in 2029, it may hit us on its return visit on Apr. 13, 2036. To do so, the asteroid would have to pass through a tiny, 600-ft.-wide gravitational "keyhole" during its 2029 flyby. In that unfortunate case, its trajectory would be altered slightly enough to make its 2036 return trip a real threat to the Earth.

That announcement prompted NASA spokesman **Donald Yeomans** to point out that the odds against such a collision are around 1 in 250,000. It also prompted Soviet astronomer **Leonid Sokolov** of St. Petersburg State University to point out that, even if Apophis were to find the keyhole, it likely would break up into tiny fragments in Earth's upper atmosphere in 2036, producing smaller and less dangerous impacts. (Less dangerous, that is, except to anyone standing in their paths.)

Still..

Here's your chance to find out whether you're basically an optimist or a pessimist: an optimist would say that 1 chance in 250,000 is very long odds indeed, and there's nothing to worry about.

A pessimist, on the other hand, would point out that one chance in 250,000 is much better odds than your winning next week's Mega Millions lottery.

The bottom line here is that it doesn't really matter one way or another whether Apophis is a hit or a miss. As every intelligent thinker knows, the world is gonna end on Dec. 21, 2012. (Or had you forgotten about that?)

*Now that winter is on its way out, we can start getting ready for the upcoming season. Next season used to be *spring*; now it's the pollen season.

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Upcoming Meetings/Activities. Our activity schedule is warming up with the weather.

At 7:00 p.m. on **Tues., Mar. 1st**, we'll conduct an observing for 2nd-graders at Jackson Road Elementary School in Griffin. We've been there several times in the past, and we've always been treated splendidly. The teachers keep tight reins on the children, and everyone has a blast. A large crowd is expected, so wipe the cobwebs out of your telescope tube and c'mon out and join us!

To get to JRE from, say, Hampton, go to I-75 South and get off at Exit 205 (Ga. Hwy. 16). Bear right, and about ¼ mi. ahead turn right onto Jackson Road. The school is on the right about 7 mi. ahead, at the top of a long hill. Drive behind the school, and we'll be parked on the large field at the other end of the road, beyond the traffic circle and playground.

Our Cox Field observings will be held on **Fri.-Sat., Mar. 4th-5th**.

Our club meeting will be held at 7:30 p.m. on **Thurs., Mar. 10th** in Room 305 of the Flint Bldg. on the UGa-Griffin campus.

On the following evening, **Fri., Mar. 11th**, we'll return to the UGa-Griffin campus for our first lunar observing of 2011. We'll be there from 7-10 p.m.

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People You Should Know: Rick Staylor. The purpose of this portion of the *Observer* is to acquaint you with members who you might not know but merit

your attention. In **Rick Staylor's** case, this segment of PYSK should be called "Someone You Really, Really, **Really** Should Know."

To repeat: You really, *really*, **really** should get to know Rick Staylor.

Why? We'll get to that shortly. But first...

Rick is a new member. He's 70 years young, retired, lives in Perry, Ga., and is new to astronomy as well as FRAC.

Rick found out about us while cruising the web – that's an important clue as to why we're recognizing him here – and he visited a UGa-Griffin observing, liked what he saw, and decided to join the club.

Displaying a complete lack of understanding of the dynamics of leadership, **yr. president** tried at first to convince Rick not to join FRAC. We pointed out that (a) Perry is a tad bit more than a hop, skip and a jump from Griffin or Cox Field, and (b) MGAS, the astronomy club in Macon, is closer to his home. But as we said, Rick likes FRAC. (The feeling is mutual, incidentally.) And because Rick's money is as good as anyone else's we eventually stopped trying to convince him of why he shouldn't join us.

Rick is a really nice guy – but so are a lot of other folks in FRAC. He'll talk the ears off a Grecian urn, too – but that doesn't make him unique in FRAC, either. So what is it about Rick Staylor that makes him a one-of-a-kind keeper like a 23-lb. largemouth bass?

The web.

Rick uses the web as an additional source of income in his retirement. He plays the web with the virtuoso talents of a concert pianist. He looks for stuff at bargain basement prices, then buys it and sells it for more than he paid for it. That's how he spends his days, and he's very good at it.

It occurred to us recently that Rick could use his talent for finding low, low prices on the web to help his friends in FRAC. So here's what he's agreed to do:

Upon your request – and given specific information about exactly what you're looking for – Rick will search the web and find you the lowest price for it. He won't buy it and sell it back to you at a profit – but he'll let you know where to get what you're looking for at the lowest possible price.

Yr. editor sent out an e-mail from Rick in early Feb. regarding a truss-tube Dobsonian telescope on sale for the low, low, low price of \$550. (It was worth at least twice that much.) We sent it as an example of Rick's talent in action.

Rick doesn't know much about telescopes yet – but he knows a LOT about buying and selling for profit. Since joining FRAC, he's already bought and sold several telescopes, so he's intimately familiar with the process if not the product. And he can help you too. All ya gotta do is ask him to.

Now, isn't that a good reason for considering Rick Taylor a Person You Should Know?

You can contact Rick at raginrick@yahoo.com, or call him at 478-334-5890. Be specific about what you want him to find.

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ASTRONOMY vs. ASTROLOGY

article by Bill Warren

Many otherwise-intelligent individuals are guilty of confusing astronomy with its illegitimate sibling, *astrology*.

To astronomers, astrology is a four-letter word that elicits the same warm, fuzzy feeling that we get when someone mentions IRS audits.

It wasn't always that way, however. Astronomy and astrology share common roots. They were virtually synonymous for nearly 3,000 years. Ancient astronomers were called astrologers: they studied the sky in order to locate celestial bodies and interpret their movements in human terms. It wasn't until about 600 years ago that modern science began to emerge, creating a division between astronomy and astrology that has widened ever since.

Background. Basically, astrologers believe that, just as the Moon affects tides on Earth, the location of the Sun, Moon and planets relative to the 12 zodiacal constellations at birth and throughout life shape human personalities and can be used to predict fate or influence human behavior. Astrology thus combines elements of astronomy, the occult and prophecy. It

sounds rather silly now, but until scientists began to formulate the scientific principles that we take for granted today, astrology was the only show in town.

To scientifically illiterate people – ignorant through no fault of their own, but simply because science was as yet unknown in modern terms – astrology afforded a way of understanding, explaining, predicting or controlling human events. It was serious stuff to people who believed that comets were harbingers of doom, eclipses were occasions for human sacrifices, or that metals could be turned into gold by occult means (alchemy).

History. The earliest known form of astrology probably originated in Babylon about 1,500 B.C. It eventually spread through Assyria to Greece, Egypt, Medieval Europe, the Middle East, and India. Other forms developed independently in places such as China and the ancient Mayan civilization.

Today, the main forms of astrology are Hindu, Western and Chinese. Since we're most familiar with the Western form, that's where we'll hang our hats.

“Go West, Young Man.” (Newspaper editor **Horace Greeley** said that to an aspiring reporter who asked him in the late 1800s how to succeed in the newspaper business.) Western astrology follows the ancient Greek tradition of “horoscopic astrology.” In that system, astrologers cast horoscopes, or astrological charts, to predict or influence events based on the position of the planets at the time of the event. The zodiacal constellations are referred to as “houses” because the Sun, Moon and planets reside in them. (In astrology, *Capricornus* is “Capricorn” and *Scorpius* is “Scorpio”; the other houses are unchanged.) The calendar year is divided into twelve houses; your sign is determined by which house you were born in, and it never changes.

When, during the 1960s, the Fifth Dimension sang, “When the Moon is in the seventh house, And Jupiter aligns with Mars, Then peace will guide the planets, and love will steer the stars,” they were echoing **Shakespeare's** “The fault, dear Brutus, is not in our stars, but in ourselves” (*Julius Caesar*, I, ii, 140-141).

Astrologers talk a lot about “the stars”; they’re not referring to individual stars, but to those that form the zodiacal constellations.

With the advent of scientific research methods applied to astrology by the likes of **Copernicus, Tycho Brahe, Galileo, Johannes Kepler** and others, astronomy began moving away from astrology. As science advanced, astrology was increasingly seen as unscientific because its claims could not be verified. In 1698, the Dutch astronomer **Christiaan Huygens** wrote, “As for...Astrology, that pretends to foretell what is to come, it is such a ridiculous, and oftentimes mischievous Folly, that I do not think it fit to be so much as named.”

Hooked on Horoscopes. Even today, no studies have ever shown astrology to be anything other than mysticism and superstitions. Yet a recent survey revealed that 31% of Americans believe in astrology, and another study found that 39% consider it scientific. Maybe that’s why most newspapers carry a daily horoscope column. You’ll usually find it, appropriately enough, on the comic strips page.

Your horoscope will suggest, based on your astrological sign – and I’ll bet dollars to doughnuts that you know your sign: mine is Capricorn (or at least it was) – what you should or should not do on that particular day. (I guess mine told me to write this article.)

“The stars impel; they do not compel” is a familiar astrological mantra. What it means is, your horoscope suggests – but does not dictate – your best course of action on a given day. You aren’t a slave to your horoscope, but merely a participant. That position gets the astrologer off the hook if his advice turns out to be wrong.

“Your Assignment, Mr. Phelps.” Having found and read your daily horoscope, take that same newspaper and find the daily astronomy column. Don’t spend too much time looking for it, though, because it’s not there.

So you tell me: *Who’s winning the battle for public acceptance, the astronomers or the astrologers?*

Postscript: An Unhappy Blip Appears On the Astrological Radar Screen. There were thirteen constellations in the original Babylonian zodiac: *Aquarius* (the Water Bearer); *Aries* (the Ram); *Cancer* (the Crab); *Capricorn* (the Sea Goat); *Gemini* (the Twins); *Leo* (the Lion); *Libra* (the Scales); *Ophiuchus* (the Serpent Bearer); *Pisces* (the Fish); *Sagittarius* (the Archer); *Scorpio* (the Scorpion); *Taurus* (the Bull); and *Virgo* (the Maiden). But Ophiuchus was dropped by the Babylonians because they decided they preferred twelve signs.

Enter the serpent – or more precisely, *re-enter the Serpent Bearer*, courtesy of the Minnesota Planetary Society (whatever that is).

Recently, the MPS made headlines by tossing out the old zodiac arrangements and restoring the original Babylonian 13-sign zodiac. To do this, they recalculated the calendar dates to correspond with each of the 13 signs in order to accommodate millennia of subtle shifts in the Earth’s axis. By doing so, MPS says, they now ensure that the Sun is present in each house during its assigned dates, or *ascendancy*.

The Bad News Is... Adding Ophiuchus to the mix deprives Scorpio of all but six of its days, and the changes to the other houses would alter the birth signs of millions of people, including **Larry Higgins**, me, and possibly you as well.

And the Good News Is... If you’re a closet astrology fan, don’t despair: the MPS changes are local, not nationwide. Changing the astrological houses and signs is about as likely to happen as **Barry Hussein Obama** running for president as a Republican in 2012. Believers in astrology, comfortable with it in its present form, are not likely to regard adding Ophiuchus to the zodiac as “Change You Can Believe In.”

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