

# THE FLINT RIVER OBSERVER

NEWSLETTER OF THE FLINT  
RIVER ASTRONOMY CLUB

An Affiliate of the  
Astronomical League

**Vol. 17, No. 3**                      **May, 2013**

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Webmaster, **Tom Moore**; Program  
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Coordinators, **Dwight Harness**, **Larry  
Higgins** & **Bill Warren**; NASA Contact,  
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Club mailing address: 1212 Everee Inn  
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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., May 9:** FRAC  
meeting (7:30 p.m., Rm. 291 Flynt Bldg.,

UGa-Griffin); **Fri.-Sat., May 10-11:** Joe  
Kurz WMA observings (at dark); **Thurs.,  
May 17:** UGa-Griffin lunar observing (7-10  
p.m.).

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**President's Message.** It's hard to believe  
that we're already five months into the year.  
After a long, difficult winter, it's great to see  
flowers blooming and new greenery again.

With another school year winding down,  
things have finally slowed down regarding  
public observings. Despite the cold temps  
last winter and the rain this spring, we've  
gotten in enough observing time to keep us  
from forgetting what the sky looks like  
beyond the clouds.

In 2002, FRAC acquired non-profit  
status. Somewhere along the line we let it  
lapse, but we hope to get it back. It will cost  
the club a few pennies to have it renewed,  
but we think it's worth pursuing and will  
discuss and vote on it at an upcoming  
meeting when we know exactly how many  
pennies it will cost us.

**-Dwight Harness**

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**Last Month's Meeting/Activities.** On  
March 30<sup>th</sup>, four FRACsters struggled to  
accommodate more than 3,500 attendees at  
the Bluebirds & Bluegrass Festival at Dauset  
Trails. **Steve & Betty Bentley**, **Larry  
Higgins** and **yr. editor** were constantly busy  
throughout seven hours that day, showing  
the **Sun** to a continuous flow of visitors to  
our FRAC booth and telescopes. **Frank  
Hiller** dropped by for awhile, and ex-  
members **Tim & Celia Astin** stopped to  
chat with us briefly with two grandchildren  
in tow.

We had eight attendees on a stormy  
evening at our April meeting: **Dwight &  
Laura Harness**, **Charles "Prince of**

**Darkness” Turner, Jessie Dasher, Tom Moore, Andy Hasluem, Erik Erikson & Steven “Smitty” Smith.** Charles did a “Show & Tell” segment re his new digs in New Mexico. He’ll soon be living in the land of sagebrush, saguaros, sidewinders and spectacular skies. (Charles doesn’t know it yet, but everyone in FRAC is gonna move out there and move in with him.)

Four members – **Larry Higgins, Dwight Harness, Erik Erikson & yrs. truly** – attended our Apr. 10<sup>th</sup> JKWMA observing. We tracked down **NGC 4631** and **Medusa Nebula** (see p. 6) and other seldom-visited deep-sky objects. Larry said it was the darkest skies he’d ever seen anywhere.

The following evening was even better.

How dark was it? **Aaron Calhoun** (who wears glasses) and **yr. editor** (whose vision isn’t exactly youthful) clearly saw the “eyes” in **Owl Nebula (M97)**, and we counted the stars in the faint little triangle of naked-eye stars that forms “Berenice’s Hair” (*Coma Berenices*). (There were seven.) If we’d thought of it, we’d have looked for **Copeland’s Septet** in *Leo*, to find out how many of the seven mag. 13 to 15+ members of that compact galaxy group could be seen.

\* \* \*

**This ‘n That.** When we were kids, there were four seasons: Winter, spring, summer and fall. Nowadays, we still have four seasons, but they’re not the same: cold weather, the rainy season, pollen season and hot weather.

Welcome to pollen season.

To survive the pollen, follow **Bill Clinton’s** example: *don’t inhale*.

**\*Dwight Harness** has an interesting take on the problem of how to get today’s young people into astronomy. “We need to grow them ourselves,” he says. Besides daughter **Laura**, 16, he points with pride at two

grandchildren who are astronomers-to-be: **Abby Thompson**, age 2, and her brother **John Gideon Thompson**, born March 26<sup>th</sup> (7 lbs., 10 oz.).

Given Dwight’s level-headedness, it’s no surprise that he hasn’t yet bought telescopes for Abby and John. We did, however, overhear him recently asking the folks at WalMart if they have two really, *really* big Christmas stockings.

\*Shortly after FRAC began in 1997, **Larry Higgins** was told by an AAC member that FRAC would never survive. *The Atlanta Astronomical Society couldn’t compete with us*, the gentleman said rather smugly, *and you won’t be able to either*.

Now, sixteen years later, our little club is still plugging along.

So how have we done it?

As Larry puts it, “We may be dumb, but we ain’t stupid. We’re not competing with the AAC. Never have, never will.

“It’s a great club. I was their Observing Vice President, and **Bill** (Warren), **Ken** (Walburn), **Smitty** and **Richard** (Schmude) were AAC members. We set our meetings for Thursday nights so they wouldn’t conflict with AAC meetings on Friday nights. We just wanted to offer an alternative for amateur astronomers living south of Atlanta who, like us, didn’t want to fight the Atlanta traffic to attend meetings in downtown Atlanta or observings at Villa Rica.”

Another reason for FRAC’s survival was expressed recently and rather quaintly by **Andy Hasluem**: “In FRAC, there’s a b.s. ratio of five-to-one.”

What Andy – an English astronomer – meant, of course, is that while we’re astronomers, we don’t let that fact get in the way of having fun.

In England, Andy says, astronomers tend to take themselves and their hobby rather more seriously than we do in FRAC. The

result is the same in both cases – learning what astronomy is all about – but the process is, we think, more enjoyable when *fun* isn't regarded as a four-letter word.

So here's our take on astronomy, FRAC, and our meetings and observings:

*Astronomy is one of the most rigorous and demanding of the sciences. We appreciate that fact. But as comedian Steve Martin likes to say, We're all gonna die someday, so let's have fun tonight!*

According to *Astronomy* (May 2013, p. 10), the meteor that exploded in the atmosphere 16.5 mi. above Chelyabinsk, Russia on Feb. 15<sup>th</sup> was "the biggest known impact since the Tunguska event in 1908."

The Chelyabinsk meteor was about 55 ft. in dia. prior to entering Earth's atmosphere. Its explosive force was about 30 times that of the atomic bomb that leveled Hiroshima in 1945. Its distance from Earth at detonation – about twice as far as the Tunguska meteor – considerably dissipated its destructive force, thereby saving Chelyabinsk (pop. 1 million) from total destruction.

As it was, more than 1,000 people were injured – most of them from flying glass fragments resulting from the blast and ensuing shock waves. Incredibly, no one was killed, but there was considerable property damage and destruction in and around the city.

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**Upcoming Meetings/Activities.** With the public schools' summer vacations almost upon us and daylight savings time affording an extra hour of sunlight every day, our public observing schedule is slowing down. But that's not all bad: it gives us time to think about ourselves for awhile.

At 7:30 p.m. on **Thurs., May 9<sup>th</sup>**, we'll hold our monthly club meeting in Room 219 of the Flynt Bldg. at UGa-Griffin.

Our Joe Kurz WMA observings will be held on **Fri.-Sat., May 10<sup>th</sup>-11<sup>th</sup>**.

On **May 17<sup>th</sup>**, we'll return to the UGa-Griffin campus for our monthly lunar observing. We'll set up our 'scopes on the lawn in front of the Flynt Bldg. from 7-10 p.m.

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### **The Sky In May: A Plethora of Planets.**

This will be a great month for planetary observing, with five planets visible at night – or at least shortly after sunset for two of them – and two others visible in the morning hours. Only **Mars**, rising just before sunrise, will escape our view in May.

**Saturn** (mag. 0.2) will be up all night. That's very good news, because the ringed planet offers almost as much viewing pleasure as a knothole in a nudist colony fence.

**Mercury** (mag. -0.8) and **Venus** (mag. -3.9) will be visible, low in the WNW sky, shortly after sunset during the last half of May. **Jupiter** (mag. -1.4) will begin the month high in the WNW, but will drop about 1-1/2 **Moon**-widths lower in the sky every evening.

That planetary trio – Mercury, Venus and Jupiter – will form some lovely compact triangles between May 24<sup>th</sup>-May 29<sup>th</sup>, lying within 5° of each other – that's three finger-widths held against the sky -- low in the WNW.

On May 24<sup>th</sup>, Mercury and Venus will lie less than 1-1/2° apart. (Venus will be 15 times brighter than Mercury.)

On May 26<sup>th</sup>, the trio will fit within a 2-1/2° circle of sky, and Venus and Mercury will be less than 1-1/2° apart.

On May 27<sup>th</sup>, Venus and Jupiter will be less than 1-1/2° apart, and on the following evening they'll be just 1° apart.

Did we mention that all three of those planets – and Saturn as well -- are naked-eye objects? They will provide a good

opportunity for **Steve Bentley** to try out his new cataract-free eyes after two recent surgeries.

Continuing our analysis of Planets on Parade, **Uranus** (mag. 6, in *Pisces*) and **Neptune** ((mag. 8, in *Aquarius*) will be visible before sunrise.

Let's see: there's Mars (invisible); Saturn, Mercury, Venus and Jupiter in the night sky; and Uranus and Neptune in the pre-dawn morning sky. Have we left anything out?

Oh yeah: the **Earth**. It's visible all month. Look down. You might be able to see it beneath the pollen.

If you've never seen an asteroid before, here's your chance. On April 29<sup>th</sup>, the mag. 8.4 asteroid **4 Vesta** will pass directly in front of **NGC 2158**, a thumbnail-sized open cluster lying less than 1/2° SW of the large, bright open cluster **M35** in *Gemini*. Since Vesta will be 7.5 times brighter than any of the stars in 2158, it will be easy to tell which of the "stars" in the cluster is the asteroid.

The **Eta Aquarids meteor shower** will run from Apr. 19<sup>th</sup>-May 28<sup>th</sup>, peaking during the evening of May 5<sup>th</sup>-6<sup>th</sup>. Its meteors are leftover dust particles from **Halley's Comet**.

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**PROF. STARGAZER AND THE  
"GRAYING" OF ASTRONOMY:  
An Exclusive Interview**

*An article by **Ron Whitehead** in the March '13 issue of The Reflector (pp. 10-11, 14-16) asks, "Where Are the Young in Our Astronomy Clubs?" Aside from our wanting to ask, "The young what?," the article was, we thought, enlightening and informative.*

***Prof. Theophilus Stargazer** is FRAC's resident authority on astronomy, cosmology and ways to avoid paying for meals at restaurants. Since the professor allegedly*

*was once a young person himself, we decided to ask him about the "graying" of astronomy and what might be done to attract young people into FRAC. As always, his answers were thought-provoking, challenging and frightfully expensive.*

**Felix Luciano:** As you know, Professor, astronomy is increasingly becoming a hobby for older people. What can we do in FRAC to lower the median age of our members?

**Prof. Stargazer:** Lie about your age.

**Steve Bentley:** Will that attract young people to our club?

**Prof. Stargazer:** No -- and it won't get you a Senior Citizens' discount at IHOP, either. But it may help you to pick up chicks in bars. It works for me.

**Joe Morris:** But you're not single.

**Prof. Stargazer:** No, but the young ladies at the "Win One For the Stripper" bar in Atlanta think I am.

**Dwight Harness:** Getting back to astronomy, Professor: at what age is it acceptable to buy a child a telescope?

**Prof. Stargazer:** It doesn't matter how old you are, as long as you can afford it.

**Smitty:** I think he meant the child's age, sir.

**Prof. Stargazer:** I'd say six years old is a good age.

**Erik Erikson:** Isn't that a bit young for a child to learn how to operate a telescope?

**Prof. Stargazer:** No, I meant that six years old is a good age. As I recall, I had a great time as a six-year-old. By the time the stars came out, I was putting moves on my teddy bear.

**Jessie Dasher:** How can we get more pre-teens and teenagers to come to our meetings, sir?

**Prof. Stargazer:** Invite **Justin Bieber** to speak.

**Bill Warren:** We tried that, but he wouldn't come.

**Prof. Stargazer:** Previous engagement? Concert tour?

**Bill:** No, UGa-Griffin wouldn't allow his spit cup on campus. *(Note to **Ken Walburn:** that was a joke. According to reports, Bieber spat on his nextdoor neighbor during an argument. –Ed.)*

**Charles Turner:** Where are the kids, anyway?

**Prof. Stargazer:** That's what parents are wondering.

**Dylan Higgins:** Do you have any other suggestions for getting teenagers to attend a club meeting?

**Prof. Stargazer:** Hold your meeting at one of Bieber's concerts.

**Frank Hiller:** But that would be too loud!

**Prof. Stargazer:** No louder than **Larry Higgins** is after a Hefty Man's Meal at Beans 'R Us Restaurant.

That's eleven questions at \$20 a pop. For that much money, I'll throw in one more question for free.

**Tom Moore:** Do you think we could attract young people through Facebook or Twitter?

**Prof. Stargazer:** Certainly. Just don't use Bill Warren's face or Steve Bentley's twitter.



**Above: IC 405 (Flaming Star Nebula in Auriga).** In visual terms, at least, the term “underwhelming” leaps to mind in describing IC 405. Although large –  $1/2^\circ \times 1/3^\circ$  – this reflection/emission nebula defies attempts to make any sense of it visually even when using a nebula filter and averted vision under dark skies.

Doubtless, much of the problem stems from its location surrounding (and north of) the mag. 5 or 6 variable star **AE Aurigae**. And that's a shame, too, because with a terrific nickname like “Flaming Star Nebula” you're expecting fireworks and all you get is fizzle. *(That's the same thing **Aimee Mann** says about hubby **Steve**.)* Take the word of one who has on several occasions observed this visual will-o-the-wisp: It ain't worth the effort!

Ah, but there's no such problem with **Felix Luciano's** evocative photo of the Flaming Star: it shows the nebula as a **Jimi Hendrix**-like purple haze, or perhaps as smoke drifting from a campfire.

IC 405 is #31 on the late **Sir Patrick Caldwell-Moore's** list of 109 celestial objects that rival the Messiers in beauty, i.e., the Caldwell Club.

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**Above: NGC 4631** (a.k.a. **Whale Galaxy** and **Caldwell 32**), a barred spiral galaxy in *CVn* (photo by **Alan Pryor**). Like **NGC 4565 (Needle Galaxy)**, NGC 4631 is one of the finest examples of an edge-on galaxy to be seen in the spring sky. Large – 15' x 3.3' – and bright (mag. 9.2), The Whale dominates its surroundings like a 7-ft.-tall 3<sup>rd</sup> grader. Here's how **yr. editor** described it in his Herschel 400 observing notes: "A large, bright, thickly elongated gray slash with a grainy, mottled appearance. Huge at 147x, best seen at 56x and *incredible* at all magnifications! Oriented E-W, with brightness consistent throughout. The E end was tapered rather abruptly, whereas the W end was longer and tapered gradually, like a long, pointed stick. A mag. 12 field star overlay the N edge at the galaxy's off-center bulge. I didn't see the tiny mag. 12 companion galaxy NGC 4627 (*located to the left of The Whale in Alan's photo. -Ed.*)"

Also appearing in the role of supporting cast to the right of 4631 are the interacting Herschel 400 galaxy pair **NGCs 4656-57**. As before, yr. editor didn't see the companion (4657, *the curved portion below 4656*), but he saw 4656 as "extremely elongated, needle-like. Oriented NE-SW and brightness constant through the center

and tapering rapidly at the ends. Faintly seen, reveals itself best at low power."

**Below: Medusa Nebula (PK 205+14.1, a.k.a Sharpless 2-274 and Abell 21)**, a planetary nebula in *Gemini* (photo by **Felix Luciano**). Felix has accomplished two things here: he's captured the essence of a very pretty and unusual planetary nebula, and he's found an object that yr. editor had never observed or even looked for. Medusa Nebula is a Planetary Nebula Program target, but it is not included in any other A. L. observing programs.

The planetary's overall brightness – mag. 10.3 – is misleading, since it's also large at 10' in dia. **Larry Higgins, Dwight Harness, Erik Erikson & yr. editor** saw it at JKWMA in April. It's best seen with an O-III filter. It's faint. Very faint.



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***BREAKING NEWS: YR. EDITOR HAS JUST BEEN NOTIFIED THAT A FRAC MEMBER WILL WIN THE 2013 PUBLISHERS CLEARINGHOUSE "\$5,000 A WEEK FOREVER" JACKPOT! IT IS MY GREAT HONOR TO ANNOUNCE THAT THE WINNER IS***