

Museum of Natural History
BUTTERFLY FESTIVAL

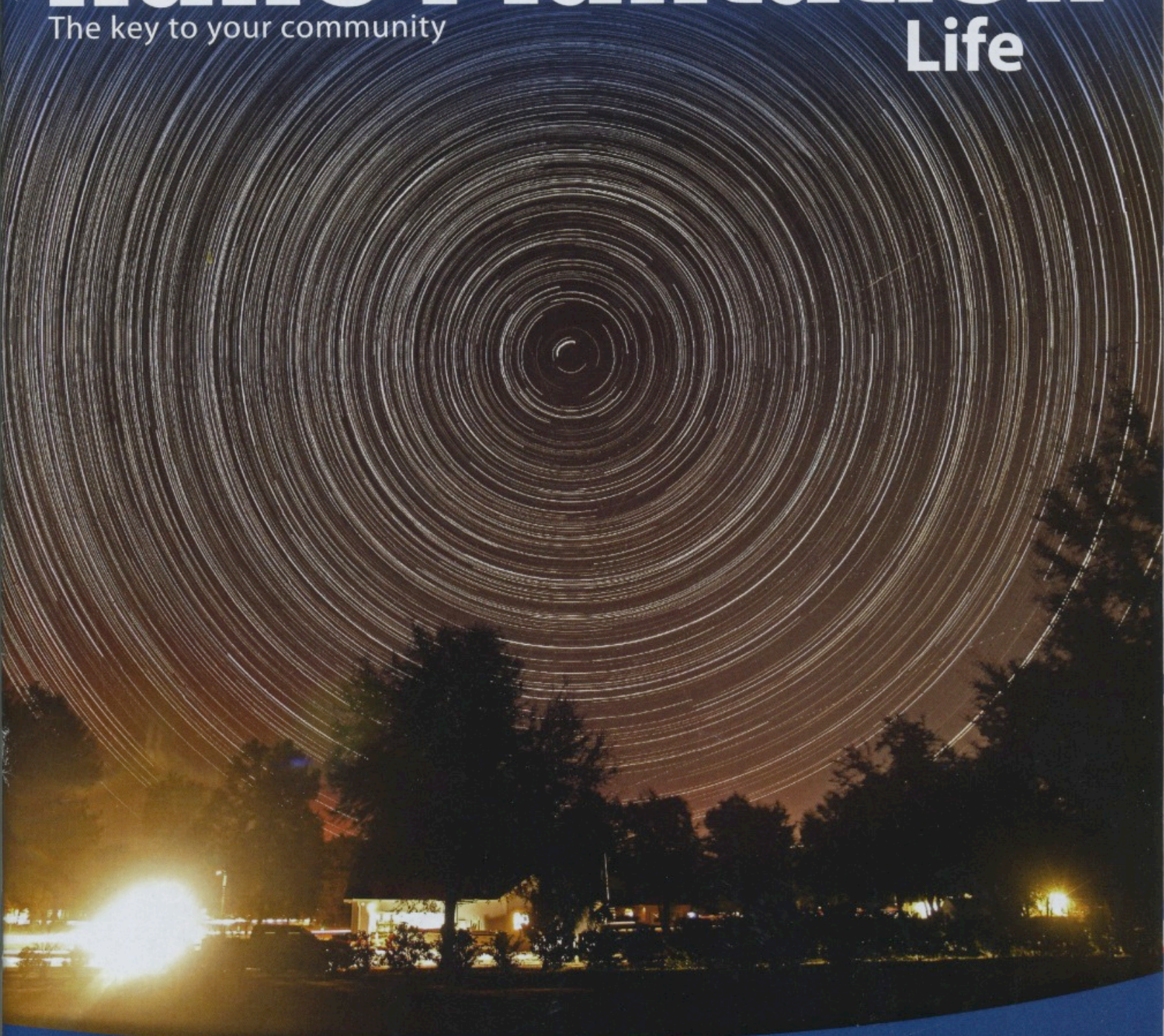
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Life



Star Gazers

Join Others Studying the Night Skies over Gainesville

Observing the Stars

UF emeritus professor Howard L. Cohen points out the many opportunities Gainesville residents have to look skyward and to learn.



Howard Cohen's grandson, Elliot, looks through a telescope that was used by Cohen to take a picture of the sun.
Photo courtesy of Howard L. Cohen

by Howard L. Cohen
Community contributor

An article in the August 2013 issue of Haile Plantation Life titled, "How to Host a Star Party" by Adrian A. Feebles, was interesting but much less informative than it could have been. The article was so generic that it did little to inform readers about the real wealth of opportunities in our area to view the night sky.

For example, Feebles's article talks about checking with nearby museums and observatories. His section called, "Join a Club," discusses how to find and join a club but fails to mention these specific resources are already available in North Central Florida.

The University of Florida is privileged to house a large and respected Department of Astronomy, the only Florida university with a graduate program in this discipline. Its campus observatory has held public nights Friday evenings (8:30 p.m. to 10 p.m.) when classes are in session for more than 25 years. See

their website at Astro.ufl.edu/outreach/publicnight.html.

Active local astronomy club

Fortunately, our region also has a large, active astronomy club that I helped found in 1987, the Alachua Astronomy Club, Inc. (AAC). Membership is open to anyone interested in astronomy.

The club holds public meetings at 7 p.m. on the second Tuesday of the month at the Florida Museum of Natural History's (FLMNH) Powell Hall. Visit their website at Alachuaastronomyclub.org.

org. Meetings feature speakers talking about astronomy and the space sciences.

In addition, the AAC not only holds star parties for members and guests but also for the public and schools. The former includes annual public events that often draw hundreds if not thousands of visitors: Paynes Prairie's Hickory Farm early in the year, Dudley Farm Historic State Park usually in Fall, Kanapaha's Moonlight Walk in the Spring, and Starry Night at Powell Hall.

Starry Night has now become a major annual fall event held jointly with the FLMNH, UF's Department of Astronomy, Santa Fe College and the AAC. Visitors can listen to speakers, see exhibits or displays, enjoy a planetarium show in UF's portable planetarium and see celestial objects with telescopes outside the museum entrance. Starry Night is scheduled this year for Friday, Nov. 15.

Previous Starry Nights have probably drawn more people than any other single

public star party in Florida.

Finally, the AAC also holds occasional lunar observing star parties as it did last February in Melrose. The club plans another lunar star party Oct. 12 in honor of "International Observe the Moon Night." (Details TBA.)

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— Howard L. Cohen

Feeble's article also discusses buying a telescope. Unfortunately, some information given here misleads the reader about telescopes. For example, hobby stores are usually poor places to buy telescopes. And many telescopes on the market, especially those found in department and similar stores, are "junk telescopes." Nothing is worse than a junk telescope that discourages interest in the sky.

However, all is not lost. AAC's November's presentation will now feature a talk on this very topic titled, "Choosing a Beginning Telescope" by AAC member, Bill Helms!

(Howard L. Cohen is an Emeritus Associate Professor of Astronomy with the University of Florida's Department of Astronomy.)



A close-up of the moon taken by Haile Plantation resident Howard L. Cohen shows the many craters created by meteors striking its surface over the past billions of years .
Photo courtesy of Howard L. Cohen

25yrs

The UF campus observatory has held public nights every Friday from 8:30 p.m. to 10 p.m. when classes are in session for more than 25 years.

People need not spend time searching widely on the Internet "to find out where to look and what to look for" as Feebles writes. North Florida already has these resources and the author should have specifically mentioned them. Perhaps next time your pages will feature articles that are less general but give explicit information that will really aid your readers to gaze up at the night sky.—Howard L. Cohen

OVERLOOKED AREA HAS A PLANETARIUM

The last section of Feebles's article, titled, "Visit a planetarium," fails to mention a planetarium but instead refers to visiting an observatory. Most readers, in fact, will be confused since the difference between a planetarium and an observatory is not well understood by most people. A planetarium is an indoor theater that can create the appearance of the night sky; an observatory is an outdoor facility containing telescopes to view the real sky. Worst, the article does not mention that our area has a wonderful planetarium at Santa Fe College, the Kika Silva Pla Planetarium. Go to their website at Sfcollege.edu/planetarium.—Howard L. Cohen

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The Perseid Meteor Shower sends streaks across the sky above Haile Plantation earlier this year.
Photo courtesy of Howard L. Cohen