

LIGHTNING BUGS: NATURE'S NIGHT LIGHT

It's summertime! Hot days, warm nights, and the magical glow of Lightning Bugs!

Lightning bugs, fireflies, glow-worms, whatever you call them, are actually beetles of the Lampyridae family. Their "glow" is bioluminescence, which is the production of light by living organisms through a natural chemical reaction of luciferin and luciferase. All species of firefly larvae have this ability, but not all adult species do. While most of the flashing varieties live east of the Mississippi River, northeastern Oklahoma is home to several species of what we call lightning bugs with their quick, bright flashes.

Fireflies live in temperate and tropical areas and on every continent except Antarctica. There are about 2200 species worldwide and about 165 make their homes in the US and Canada. They are usually active here from late May to early August. In late May and early June they are at their peak.

Fireflies prefer warm, humid evenings so all of our recent rain should make this a good year for them. Adult fireflies lay their eggs in moist soil. The larvae overwinter in the soil, in rotten logs or under dead leaves. Firefly larvae are predators of soft-bodied invertebrates like slugs, snails, and worms. The adults emerge in the spring and live on nectar and pollen, which makes them a real asset for gardeners.

Due to habitat loss and light pollution there are fewer fireflies these days, but there are some things we can do to help them out. Fireflies need moisture, food, safe places to live and dark night skies. A pollinator friendly garden is an ideal firefly habitat. Because they flash in the evening to attract mates, turning off outside lights and closing window shades

to keep inside lighting inside helps them to find each other. Provide a water source and include a variety of native flowers and plants in your garden for food. Leave some leaf litter on the ground to create a safe place for fireflies to spend the daylight hours, mate, hunt, and overwinter. Pesticides can directly kill fireflies and their larvae and prey so use them only as a last resort.

As children, many of us spent warm summer evenings catching lightning bugs in a jar. Chasing those magical glowing bugs as they danced across the yard was as much fun as eating ice cream or running through the lawn sprinkler. With a little help from us, our children and grandchildren will think so, too.

Sources:

“Lightning Bugs Work Magic in Summer Sky,” The Oklahoman, September 8, 2014

“About Fireflies” published by the Xerces Society for Invertebrate Conservation

“Endangered Species Conservation” published by the Xerces Society for Invertebrate Conservation

“Glowing, Glowing, Gone,” Firefly Conservation and Research firefly.org