

MOUNTAINS

A firefly season recap from the experts



Word from the Smokies
Frances Figart
Columnist

In Southern Appalachia, late May through June is a time of birth. Wild-flower blooms erupt, fawns and cubs scamper through the woods, and baby birds test their wings.

When night falls, other creatures take flight. For the charismatic, glowing beetles we know as fireflies, it's not the beginning but the end of their life cycle. Having spent most of their lives as larvae, the males finally get their wings and go off in search of a mate.

"The fireflies were right on time," said Knoxville's Lynn Faust, the author of "Fireflies, Glow-worms, and Lighting Bugs" and the expert who created a scientific formula for figuring out when the peaks of display will occur for nearly two dozen species in our area. Firefly development is highly dependent on temperature, so the emergence periods for different types of lightning bugs can vary from year to year.

"Over the past 30 years that I have kept records, we have had peaks as early as the third week of May and peaks as late as the third week of June," Faust said. "It appears to be directly related to how warm or cool it has been in the weeks leading up to the peak."

Back in April, Great Smoky Mountains National Park planned to hold this year's synchronous firefly viewing event June 1-8, having not been able to provide access to the show during 2020's COVID-19 closures. To keep everyone safe, vehicle passes replaced the shuttle system.

"This year's ticketed event was different than what we've done before, but it went very smoothly due to a lot of planning and teamwork," said Becky Nichols, the park's entomologist and long-time firefly scientist. "Spring temperatures this year were somewhat cool, leading to a display period that was a little later than in recent years."

Firefly photographer Radim Schreiber drove from his home in Iowa to the Smokies and back twice this season to view and capture fireflies on film.

"I was happy to be in the Smokies after not being able to come last year," he said. "The fireflies seem to be having a good year. I have seen blue ghosts and



Phausis reticulata, the blue ghost fireflies, hover just above the ground in search of mates, creating an unforgettable eerie yet friendly glow. COURTESY OF RADIM SCHREIBER, FIREFLYEXPERIENCE.ORG

synchronous fireflies in numbers perhaps better than previous years."

A decade ago, when Schreiber was first experimenting with firefly photography, a friend told him about the astonishing Southern Appalachian light shows and suggested he visit Great Smoky Mountains National Park.

"I jumped in the car, went straight to the Smokies, and found a campground full of people that came to see these fireflies as well," he recalls. "The excitement was in the air, and I had some of the most magical experiences of my life watching synchronous fireflies flashing around me."

One of his photos from that first year called "Gathering of Souls" won the Smithsonian Photography Contest several years later. Schreiber eventually quit his day job and now makes a living doing contract filmography and selling his firefly photography on his website, FireflyExperience.org. During his first trip to the Smokies this year, he worked with park partner organization Discover Life in America to create a virtual firefly experience that was broadcast June 1.

"Once again, Radim really outdid himself with a spectacular collage of firefly displays and information about these amazing insects," said Will Kuhn, director of science and research for

DLiA, which also hosts a live viewing event each year at Norton Creek near the park.

"Our fireflies event went great this year," he said. "Emergence of the synchronous fireflies was slowed a bit by some cool weather in May, but the blue ghost fireflies — which are usually on their way out by synchronous time — were spectacular!"

Many people think of lightning bugs as being unique to GSMNP. But these fantastic flashers and ghostly glowers can live anywhere that provides their desired habitat. The experts say all you need to do is turn off your lights and look in the right places.

"Blue ghost fireflies are fairly widespread in east Tennessee and western North Carolina from the lowlands to the mountains," Kuhn said. "They display from early May to early June, then again from late June into July. Find an area with a nice big green forest, plop down in a chair, and see what fireflies you can see."

If they're present, blue ghosts will start to appear around 9:30 p.m. as tiny greenish or blueish lights hovering near the ground. Because they're small and dim, you'll get the best results when you leave all lights off to let your eyes fully adjust to the darkness.

"Based on all the reports I've received, I would say that the blue ghosts have been the stars of the year," said Faust. "And they are in the Knoxville area."

It's important to wait for true dark, have no lights on, and pay attention. You will be amazed at what you can see in the Southern Appalachians.

"I keep coming back because I enjoy these beautiful fireflies and the wonderful people that share the same passion," said Schreiber. "And frankly, these fireflies just look very good on camera."

Descriptions of the local species — including their habitat, what time of the year they emerge, what time of night to look for them, and their distinct flash pattern — are found in "Fireflies, Glow-worms, and Lighting Bugs." Look for it in the Great Smoky Mountains Association's bookstores inside park visitor centers and online at smokiesinformation.org.

Frances Figart is the editor of Smokies Life magazine and the Creative Services Director for the 28,000-member Great Smoky Mountains Association, an educational nonprofit partner of Great Smoky Mountains National Park. Learn more at smokiesinformation.org and reach the author at frances@gsmassoc.org.

Happy Birthday!

~ June 19, 1918 ~

Ruth Penland
turns 103
today and will
be celebrating
her special day
with family
and friends.

Tupelo Honey's Biscuits for a Cause raises funds for employees in need

Staff reports

ASHEVILLE - Tupelo Honey, the Asheville-based Southern restaurant with 16 U.S. locations, has formed the nonprofit "Biscuits for a Cause."

The effort has been made to manage a guest-driven relief fund for employees in need. To date, the fund has raised more than \$500,000, according to a press release.

The 'Biscuits for a Cause' effort kicked off last summer to help support the company's employee relief fund during COVID-19.

When customers purchase a \$4 appetizer of buttermilk biscuits with blueberry jam and whipped butter, all proceeds goes into the relief fund. Tupelo Honey servers explain the program to guests at each table, often suggesting the biscuit appetizer.

More than 150 employees represent-

ing all 16 locations have received relief funding grants to date, totaling more than \$250,000. Grants help employees pay medical bills, avoid evictions, rebuild after weather damage and other emergency needs.

The 'Biscuits for a Cause' relief fund is a confidential, tax-free financial assistance program for all part- and full-time Tupelo Honey employees, who can apply for grants through the company's Human Resources Department.

"This program will continue to grow and have the ability to support hundreds of our teammates across the country," said Tupelo Honey's Chief Operating Officer Caroline Skinner. "It is now an important part of our culture and an amazing testament of our guest's commitment of support and kindness for others — truly Southern hospitality."

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