

The Light in the Forest

Right around midsummer, in a quiet corner of Pennsylvania, a rare species of firefly puts on a dazzling, one-of-a-kind show.

By **Gina DeCaprio Vercesi**

NIGHT HAD FALLEN on Allegheny National Forest in northwestern Pennsylvania. It was a few days past the summer solstice—that magical June evening when Robin Goodfellow and his troupe of fairies from *A Midsummer Night's Dream* emerge to frolic in the forest and hoodwink young lovers. But instead of Shakespearean sprites, I'd come in search of the rare *Photinus carolinus*, a charismatic species of firefly that puts on a spectacular, synchronized light show each year, just as spring slips into summer.

I first observed this glittering mating ritual, in which the males of the species illuminate in unison to attract females, on a 2016 trip to Great

▲ The annual firefly mating ritual at Peggy and Ken Butler's farm in Kellettsville, Pennsylvania.

Smoky Mountains National Park. It was there, in 1992, that a naturalist named Lynn Frierson Faust helped scientists identify the Western Hemisphere's first synchronous fireflies. A decade later, after a tip-off from some campers, Faust and her Firefly International Research and Education (FIRE) colleagues confirmed the existence of *P. carolinus* in Allegheny National Forest, citing a particularly robust population near the blink-and-you'll-miss-it village of Kellettsville.

The news came as a surprise to Peggy and Ken Butler, whose Kellettsville backyard turned out to be a hotbed of firefly activity. "We didn't know that the lightning bugs were anything special," Peggy Butler told me. "But then the FIRE team came and introduced us to the world of synchronous fireflies, and our lives changed."

Peggy recalled that Faust had presented two choices. "Lynn said, 'You can walk away quietly, or



embrace these fireflies as something that might be a benefit to your community.’”

The Butlers opted for the latter, forming a nonprofit and, in the summer of 2013, hosting the inaugural **Pennsylvania Firefly Festival** (pafireflyevents.org) on their sprawling rural homestead, which they later dubbed Kellettsville Firefly Farm. The couple saw the fireflies as a way to promote environmental stewardship and bring tourism to their county, one of the state’s poorest.

Faust had also shared a cautionary tale. She had witnessed the influx of “fireflyers” in the Smokies, which led the park to institute a lottery system to manage the crowds. The Butlers were skeptical. “Ken and I said, ‘Well, nobody’s going to come to Forest County for this,’” Peggy told me. They couldn’t have been more wrong.

Last June, my fascination with the bioluminescent beetles led me to drive from New York to the Pennsylvania Wilds, a 13-county region that includes Allegheny National Forest. The Wilds encompasses what was once one of the country’s most heavily exploited natural landscapes. A century and a half ago, barons of industry cut down the forests and mined the earth for oil and coal. Today, lush mountainsides and pristine woodlands tell a story of resurrection.

I stayed at the **Lodge at Glendorn** (glendorn.com; doubles from \$530), a luxurious retreat outside the town of Bradford. In 1927, Clayton Glenville Dorn, a petroleum engineer with a passion for fly-fishing, purchased the 1,500-acre property as a family gathering place. Now a Relais & Châteaux resort, it consists of a main lodge and 12 storybook cottages. I fell instantly in love with mine, the whimsical log-and-plank Miller Cabin, which is tucked along the edge of a stream.

Synchronous fireflies rarely fly or flash when temperatures fall below 60 degrees. I’d been stalking the forecast, willing Mother Nature to cooperate. On the morning of the festival, the nighttime low was predicted to be a balmy 68—ideal conditions for a memorable light show.

Early that evening I followed Route 666 to Peggy and Ken’s farmhouse. People milled around the big backyard while local folk musician Matt Miskie sang and played guitar, and science educator Don Salvatore prepared to give a presentation called “The Secret Lives of Fireflies.”

The scene couldn’t have been more mellow—a far cry, Peggy told me, from previous years. “One time we had almost 1,100 people,” she said. “We knew we needed to do something or we were going to endanger the fireflies.” Now the festival is limited to 50 participants a night, with an emphasis on education and conservation.

From the meadow on the edge of the forest I had a front-row seat at the firefly orgy. The courtship began slowly, just a few bold males sending forth their candescent come-ons—six flashes, then darkness. Six more. Dark. Others joined the action and soon thousands of tiny lanterns pulsed in harmony, creating a dazzling display that unfurled through the trees. Pick me, the flashes seemed to say, pick me.

It was after midnight when I left the Butlers’ farm. As I drove through the forest’s inky darkness, the words to one of Miskie’s songs played in my head:

*Oh my Pennsylvania home
A hundred million fireflies
Dance beneath your summer skies. 🌍*