



July 2025 Musing
Fireflies and Falling Stars

by Stephen Wilbers
Middle Eau Claire Lake

Dusk is when I like to see them most. In the gloaming, as John Keats and other English Romantic poets call it, during those mysterious twilight hours just after the sun dips below the horizon.

But they're also fun to watch in the darker hours before midnight, when their light is more pronounced and when they tend to be most active.

It's primarily the males, strutting their stuff (wouldn't you know?), showing off their light to attract a mate. Sometimes it comes in a single flash, "like the flashcubes on my father's old Instamatic" as Margaret Renkl describes their sudden bursts in her [New York Times article](#).

Often it appears in lines of yellow, or sometimes J-shaped streaks ending with a final flourish. You can imagine hearing their proud "ta das!" as they proclaim, "I'm so cool. Now get over here, will ya?" Insistent, not to be denied, like male chickadees singing, "Come here, come here!" over and over again in the spring, or like the nighttime wail of a loon, a sound we never forget. And we hope never ends.

Their eerie, other-worldly light comes from bioluminescence, as [Astro Bob](#) explains in his Duluth News Tribune columns, a chemical reaction involving oxygen, luciferin, and luciferase. And if you love fireflies, he writes, you probably love stars.

To see both, we need to keep our dark skies dark, our starry skies starry, free of unshielded artificial light, so easily accomplished with a simple switch, motion detector, or timer. Besides, light pollution interferes with the mating behavior of these marvelous creatures. And if you know what's good for you, don't ever stand in the way of a male lightning bug in search of a mate.

But as [Margaret Renkl](#), writes, "Artificial lights aren't the only hazard that lightning bugs face. Habitat destruction, lawns cut too short, toxic garden chemicals, mosquito-eradication services, climate change — they all contribute

to making the planet less hospitable to these magical creatures.”

Do you love and treasure fireflies as I do? Can you see them, in Renkl’s words, “like the stars themselves come down to the trees”?

Renkl traveled across the country for a good look at fireflies. She first learned about “blue ghosts” from [Jennifer Frick-Ruppert](#), a zoologist at Brevard College in western North Carolina. And she was inspired by Lynn Frierson Faust’s [Fireflies, Glow-worms, and Lightning Bugs](#), which she describes as “the definitive field guide to fireflies of the Eastern and central United States and Canada.”

But you don’t have to go to some faraway land like the Smokey Mountains of Appalachia, and you don’t have to travel back in time to the suburbs of Cincinnati where I grew up to see them. You can see them right here on the Eau Claire Lakes. Just walk outside at night.

What is it about their insistent, quiet magic that holds us in their spell?

I never tire of watching them, especially when walking down a gravel lane on a moonless summer night, the air cool and damp, my mind awirl in a midsummer night’s dream. That’s when I find myself running with my two brothers through the tallgrass field down by the crick, our glass jars swooshing wildly through the night air. Before long, those jars leave their own faint trails behind. Especially if you give them a hard shake. Poor bugs. But they do make the most comforting and delightful night lights after your mom and dad call you home to bed.

Here’s the thing, as I said to you in [an earlier Musing article](#),

Fireflies don’t guide you
so much as mystify
and delight you
and maybe
inspire
you.

Do you remember? Can you ever forget their light once you’ve seen it? Is it something you want to share, or hope to share, with your loved ones, maybe with your children, and their children, and theirs, blinking on and off, on and off, over the years and through time? We can make that happen if we want to.

Former newspaper columnist Stephen Wilbers teaches writing at the University of Minnesota. His publications include books on effective writing, the Boundary Waters Canoe Area, and the history of the Iowa Writers' Workshop. His recent article in [About Place Journal](#) is about the poems he wrote to illustrate the avian night sky paintings of MaryBeth Garrigan and Petra Johnita Lommen. He serves as a FOECLA board member and volunteers for DarkSky Wisconsin, Starry Skies North (of Minnesota), and the Minneapolis public schools.



Helpful Links:

Learn more about [Firefly Friendly Lighting Practices](#).

Help in the fight against Aquatic Invasive Species by [volunteering](#) to work on the Town of Barnes [BAISS pontoon boat](#).

The Friends of the Eau Claire Lakes Area [2025 Newsletter is available on our website](#) to view and download.

The [9th Annual Gordon MacQuarrie Pilgrimage & Tour](#) will take place on August 22 and 23, 2025. Visit the [Barnes Area Historical Association](#) for more information and a registration form. The deadline for registration is August 12.

Please [join or renew your FOECLA membership](#) for 2025.

Mission: To protect, preserve, and improve the environmental and aesthetic qualities of the Eau Claire Lakes Area watershed including the lakes, rivers, shorelands, wetlands, forests and attendant wildlife resources.

BAYFIELD AND DOUGLAS COUNTIES, WI

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