

6-15-12 Fireflies Are Just Right

Last Saturday evening, as I said my good bye-s and thank you-s, to friends and neighbors at the *Just Right Farm*, in Plympton, I was escorted along my path of departure by the blinking and twinkling of fireflies. No planned lighting system for this new farm-to-table dining experience could compete with the wonder of these creatures. It has been too long since I've been blessed with this delightful sight that not only satisfies the moment but brings with it childhood memories of baseball games, fishing, camping and, of course, catching some fireflies in a jar to watch them glow for a while before releasing them.

The beautiful sight of dancing fireflies made me realize that I haven't been spending enough time outdoors in the evening. Not for a while, anyway. I think one reason I've been avoiding the evening hours is that it's become second nature (no pun intended) to avoid nature after dusk because of the threat of mosquitoes. While I do hate getting even a single mosquito bite because they are so itchy, it's good to know that they are not spreading diseases to us, such as West Nile virus or Eastern Equine Encephalitis, in the spring and early summer. Those diseases need to strengthen within the mosquitoes before they are spread to humans. So, in the meantime, if you feel strongly against repellants and/or you wish to spend more time outdoors in the evening, this is good to know!

Happy to have witnessed the little glowing wonders elsewhere in Plympton, I looked forward to seeing them in my own backyard upon my return. And I did! Smiling is a good thing, releasing endorphins and creating a sense of well being. I was thankful, for organic farms, for new business ventures right here in my little town, and thankful that my yard was deemed safe enough for these enchanting creatures.

As I watched with wonder, I thought I detected slightly different colors in the glowings, the way we do with stars, but I wasn't sure. It also seemed that some blinks were in the same spot, while others moved about. Part of the fun of watching is wondering where and when the light will return. My curiosity was still there in the morning, so I decided to find out a bit more about our luminescent friends.

My search quickly led to a project being conducted by the Boston Museum of Science. Here's the link: https://www.mos.org/fireflywatch/about_firefly_watch

Their site tells us "The Museum has teamed up with researchers from Tufts University and Fitchburg State College to track the fate of these amazing insects. With your help, we hope to learn about the geographic distribution of fireflies and their activity during the summer season. Fireflies also may be affected by human-made light and pesticides in lawns, so we hope to also learn more about those effects."

You can help these researchers by signing up to report your backyard (or another habitat), where the information will become another data location on a map and your comments and descriptions will help researchers. The submission was easy and only took a minute. It asks about types of plants and whether or not you use pesticides or have water bodies nearby. A report asks how many fireflies you saw, what colors and patterns of movement. One researcher is looking for any reports of flights moving in the shape of the letter J. I'm not sure why but there's no stopping entomologists! I am sure there is a good reason and I'll try to find out what it is, as I love talking about bugs!

Loving fireflies and dragonflies and disliking mosquitoes and ticks helps me to realize that we humans will always have to be careful what we do when we take action. Our actions might be filling in a wetland, draining a wetland or flooding a wetland, thinking it is useful for mosquito control or the action might be the application of pesticides, only to find that while reducing one harmful factor we also destroyed a beneficial one. Those very actions were the combination that resulted in the extinction of the dusky seaside sparrow, not so long ago.

The dusky seaside sparrow was a non-migratory songbird common in Southern Florida, in the marshes of Merritt Island; that is, until the island was flooded for mosquito control around Kennedy Space Center, flooding the sparrows' nesting grounds at the same time. Later, the nearby marshes were drained during highway construction, causing the population to decline further. By 1979, the combination of habitat loss, pollution, and pesticides resulted in only six dusky seaside sparrows known to exist; all of them male. By March of 1986, the only remaining dusky seaside sparrow was a bird named "Orange Band". He died on June 17, 1987. In memory of Orange Band, the last of his kind, I think of him in June, 2012.

Biodiversity is necessary and it measures how we are taking care of the earth. Let's aim for a balanced approach, with lots of birds and lots of fireflies. That would be *Just Right* and the best we can do.

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