

A Great Lead in to the Start of Summer

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Witness a rare light show of nature and herald the arrival of Summer in a favorite National Park!

If tulips mark the arrival of Spring, then nothing in nature ushers in the arrival of Summer more than fireflies.

Here are the details of how to witness this great event that is sure to delight the entire family.

Lightening bugs (lampyridae) like any insect comes in a variety of species. They are actually related to beetles.

Due to its location and abundant rainfall where the warm moist air from the Gulf of Mexico meets the mountains - the Smoky Mountains National Park is one of the most ecologically diverse spots on the planet. There is a huge diversity of plants, animals, and insects found here and nowhere else, and many new species yet to be discovered. The lightening bug is no exception.

Now imagine what happens when thousands of young males congregate in search of a mate for only a brief 2-week period out of the entire year. This is nature's version of Panama City, Florida at spring break! Here are the specifics of what this is and how to participate.

In the Smokies, there are 2 unique species of firefly that mass here. The synchronous fireflies all blink at the same time- it's kind of like a crowd wave pattern you would see in a large stadium. The blue ghost firefly species are even more unusual in that once their light is turned on it fades as they move and then comes on again - leaving really COOL streaks as you watch them - sometimes of slightly changing color. These two dominant species may not always be in the same areas at the same time. Just as all spring breakers thankfully don't meet at once.

Every year, the last week of April marks the opening of a lottery at the National Park service for 1,800 parking spaces during this 2-week period which is weather dependent but usually starts the last week of May and runs thru the first part of June. If you are fortunate enough to win a lottery spot, you will be given a specific date to arrive, and must pay a \$25 fee for your vehicle. This entitles

you to round trip shuttle service transport to the prime viewing areas for all occupants of your vehicle. While exact attendance is unknown, you can easily see that ticketed admissions will exceed 7,200. Add to that the number of walk in visitors from nearby campgrounds and other park areas, press, and rangers, and you get a large number of people viewing the firefly experience on any given night along the 2 plus miles of trails with the biggest concentration of fireflies we want to observe.

There is also a way to see them if you can't get a ticket. These other opportunities for free viewing should you care to arrive later, after 11pm when crowd is gone, or you can try other nearby areas of the park- but you may have to walk a fair distance.

The biggest rule is that flashlight and cell phone or any light emitting device must have a red gel in it so as not to disturb and scare off the fireflies. Also, there can be no Flash photography or loud noises, and no collecting of the fireflies in jars like when you were a child to make a glow lantern.

One of the trails is paved to be handicap accessible and the other is gravel. You may want to take mosquito repellent. Red gels and flashlights are available near the Elkmont Campgrounds trailheads along with other useful info, and bathrooms. You will want to bring a folding chair or blanket to sit on, plus



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water and snacks. You can watch them all night if desired, but trams quit running about 11pm. The show starts just after sunset.

As for photo tips, I can tell you this is like trying to take photos of fast-moving stars- and thus beyond the reach of most cell phone photographers. It will also very likely be pitch black, with the exception of visible moving red lights mostly in the hands of children. Advanced techniques, such as time lapse exposures, image stacking, and taking photos on tripods before it gets completely dark are critical. Don't move your tripod until you are ready to go to a different spot.

The Park gift shops have added items, books, images, etc. for sale to commemorate your participation at the firefly event. It is one of the most coveted and eagerly anticipated events in the Smoky Mountains, which helps to make it the most visited and acces-

sible of all the National Parks.

Please also note that fireflies are disappearing and not as abundant as they once were - SO you need to see this before it's gone in a Flash! You can contact the National Park Service for more info and/or to get a ticket and learn about these amazing insects and how their luminescent chemicals led to advanced blood tracers and other scientific discoveries. The Public Affairs Director, Dana Soehn, and her staff of Park Rangers, do a great job of answering questions and helping the many visitors see and enjoy this event. If you time it right, you can also catch the abundant blooms of spring flowers which start in late April and go through early June.

I have included a few of my images to share the experience and hope you will find these tips useful in planning your trip.