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## Fireflies

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*On today's walk I found myself in orbit around  
a black hole thinking about time dilation*  
Mike Miller

## FIREFLIES

Fireflies may be expected to have inappropriate, innate responses to foreign light, similar to those that occur in other organisms. Because of their conspicuous luminescent signals, such alterations may be more easily monitored and quantified with fireflies, as individuals and populations, than with other organisms.

Fireflies, therefore, may be useful as subjects and model systems for the study of the long- and short-term consequences of ecological insults that occur in combination. Furthermore, because much of firefly life is mediated through the firefly's own pinpoints of light in otherwise dimly lit or dark environments, its relation to light is virtually unique in the terrestrial world; foreign light will have even more serious consequences for them, and they provide a special case for study.

Fireflies have long held a special place in human cultures. The Japanese have used fireflies as metaphors for experiences of the human condition and to punctuate subtle points of a reverent natural philosophy. In North America fireflies also have cultural significance, and even today urban Americans often have fond feelings and memories for the fireflies they once met in the park or at a summer camp or even in a book. It is a culturally impoverished American who has not heard of Wah-wah-taysee, the firefly in a passage from Longfellow's *Song of Hiawatha* or does not know of the glowworm in *Hamlet*, or what a glowworm did for the Mills

Brothers, or who has not seen the golden flicker of a firefly and recalled the 1940s trio “The Three Sons.” This is to say that fireflies offer a way to present the intrusive light problem to an attentive public. A burned bear cub became the icon of a well-known cause in conservation, and Smokey was recognized and understood by millions of children and adults. Perhaps a “Blinky the Firefly,” who might say, “Remember, be enlightened, keep us in the dark,” or “Keep us, not yourselves, in the dark about light,” would be useful now?

Excerpt from *Ecological Consequences of Artificial Night Lighting*, edited by Catherine Rich and Travis Longcore.



January 24, 2014, 7:22 am  
Susan White