

BREAKING OUT

Rare critter puts on light show in 'Firefly Forest'

Blue ghosts dazzle visitors with help of man working protect them

By Mike Foley
STAFF WRITER
mfoley@greenvillenews.com

CLEVELAND — It's 8:52 p.m. and a drizzling, cloudy day has descended into dusk and finally darkness.

Under a thick canopy of mixed hardwoods and pines, the outline of your hand a foot in front of your face is barely distinguishable. Looking down the pathway toward a small clearing, there's a bit of light in the sky. It's bleed from an oversized Marietta convenience store to the south that forever changed the mountain darkness, dimming stars overhead, and bleaching the night.

Turning back toward the forest, beneath the branches and at the base of a wooded ridge, you can imagine a time when civilization didn't intrude here. You can imagine 1975, when Don Lewis and his wife, the late South Carolina poet laureate Bennie Lee Sinclair, stumbled upon a sight he's never forgotten and which forever changed his life.

"A friend had come over to visit," Lewis recalls, about the pottery studio/cottage he'd just built in this 122-acre woodland. "It got after dark and he got up, walked out the door, and then walked back in and said, 'Y'all have got to see this.'"

As far as the three sets of eyes could see, there was a neon band of light hovering 6 inches above the ground. They waded into the strange light and discovered little bugs, not the typical lightning bugs of soft Carolina nights, but smaller bugs, emitting a blueish haze.

Though Lewis and friends didn't know what they were seeing, after some research they later determined the "critters" were blue ghost fireflies — technically, *phausis reticulata* — flying 4 or 5



HEIDI HEILBRUNN / Staff

Don Lewis put his land into a conservation easement to give the blue ghost firefly a protected environment.

inches apart and blanket-ing the woods.

"I'd never heard of them before," Lewis says. "There were millions and millions of them. I don't know why there were so many, and there's never been that many again."

For 33 years, Lewis has waited for a convergence of soil temperature, moisture, breeding habits and he doesn't know what else for such a wondrous light show to reappear. He's still waiting. And at age 72, he's not sure it will happen again in his lifetime.

"I never know from one year to the next whether there will be handful of them," he says, "or thousands of them."

Yet he remains fascinated and devoted to the "little critters." He's so devoted, in fact, that he's put his land into a conservation easement administered by **Upstate Forever** that ensures his land will never be subdivided, never developed, forever left as natural as can be to preserve a habitat the blue ghost fireflies have clearly embraced.

For Lewis that decision was easy. While a developer would clearly pay a premium price for the opportunity to buy his land and develop a mountain enclave — how does "Firefly Acres" sound to you? — he remains dedicated to his idea that saving this plot of land — and its inhabitants

— is the right thing to do.

That's why he doesn't mind this story, or having hundreds and hundreds of people visit what Lewis has dubbed "Firefly Forest" each spring. Around mid-April each year, Lewis sends a notice to the 800 or so names on his e-mail list that the four-week light show is about to begin.

The few parking spaces he's carved out in his yard can accommodate about 20 carloads of people each night. If you don't get there early enough, you can park along the road and hike in, or come back another time.

If the nighttime temperature dips below 55 degrees, don't bother com-

LEARN MORE

■ For tour information and more, visit the blue ghost firefly Web site maintained by Don Lewis at:

www.doiop.com/fireflyforest

■ The Friends of DuPont State Forest near Brevard, N.C., host night hikes into the park's Buck Forest on May 28 & 29 to see the fireflies. Reserve your spot by calling: (828) 885-2477.

■ You can visit DuPont State Forest on your own any night to see the fireflies. They generally start appearing in greatest numbers the first two weeks of June. For more information, call the forest at: (828) 877-6527.

ing. The blue ghosts don't fly in cool weather. And they don't come out when it's raining heavily.

But on a warm night, with maybe a slight mist hanging in the air, you can wander Lewis' deep, dark woods to your heart's content, drinking in the wonder of nature.

Up the ridge they appear. A faint hovering glow, and then another, and yet another. And as you turn your head and bend at the waist to look from another angle, you can count 100 glows, flitting about. It's as if the stars have descended to midshin level and decided to dance for you.

Lewis sees a glow flying near his knees and reaches out and grabs it. He shines his flashlight on it and the light goes out. The blue ghost is about the size of a grain of rice. But each of the tiny bugs emits a glow about 8 inches in diameter.

The show is spectacular and Lewis knows how lucky he is to see it for a month each year.

"My goal is to preserve these little critters," he says. "I figure the more people who know about them, the better off they are."

Right now and forever, the blue ghosts are protected. Don Lewis has given all he has — his home, his studio, his expansive land holdings — to protect them.