



Bioluminescent Fireflies* of Howard County: A Mini Field Guide

Common name	Scientific name	Seasonal emergence	Active flashing time	Preferred Habitat	Flashing color	Flashing patterns	Other Notes
Eastern Firefly/Big Dipper	<i>Photinus pyralis</i>	Mid-June to early July, but can be later.	Dusk; main display when “still light enough to read”	Yards, fields, roadsides, woodlands	Yellow	Slow, J-shaped, ½ to 1 second long, every 5-7 secs. Females respond w/ 0.7-second flash.	Most commonly seen fireflies. Can live in a wide variety of habitats.
Spring Tree-Top Flasher	<i>Pyractomena borealis</i>	April-May; seen on tree trunks where they pupate. First species to flash.	45 to 90 minutes after sunset	Field/forest edge. Larvae pupate in bark, often in oak, tulip tree, hickory	Amber or deep warm yellow	¼ -second flash, every 2-3 seconds, by males slowly cruising the canopy. Females respond with long flash.	When they emerge, males search tree trunks for female larvae and pupae, guarding them until they mature.
Creekside Tree Blinker	<i>Photinus sabulosus</i>	Late June - early Aug.; peak numbers in July.	A little after 9 p.m., as night falls and dusk turns to dark.	Small to medium trees, often near water	Pale white-yellow	Quick flashes every 2-3 seconds in treetops. Flies ½- 4 feet per flash around display tree. Females emit doublet flash.	You might find them resting under leaves of favored display trees in daytime.
Pale Firefly, Yellow-Bellied FF, Pine Barrens FF	<i>Photinus scintillans</i>	June through July	Dusk to dark, 10-15 mins after sunset. In shade, may start an hour before sunset.	Woods edges, open areas, lawns, roadsides	Yellow-orange	Males flash every 2 or 3 seconds, flying low, in “hopping motion.” Females respond with quick flash from ground.	They begin flashing as <i>P. pyralis</i> display winds down for the evening.
Double Cousin firefly	<i>Photinus consanguineus</i>	Late June through July	Sunset, with peak flashing occurring for about ½ hour	Upland forest, bushes, hedges	Yellow	Males fly 1.5 to 5 feet off the ground, flashing 2 quick pulses about every five seconds. Females flash back from low vegetation.	Very similar in appearance to two other fireflies; the only distinguishable trait is the flash pattern.

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Heebie-Jeebie Firefly	<i>Photuris hebes</i>	Late June into July	20 minutes after sunset, peaking ~ 9:15-11:15 p.m., but going past midnight	Fencerows, tree lines, fields, streams.	Green, pale yellow, orange	Twinkling flash every second around trees. Dimmer than other single flashers. Females flash in grass under trees.	Males gather around certain trees. Firefly expert Lynn Faust sees them around walnuts.
July Comets and Big Scaries	<i>Photuris lucicrescens</i>	June and July; some females can be seen in August	45 minutes after sunset to midnight or later	Woods' edges and surrounding open areas, often near water	Green	Males emit flash that intensifies for up to 2 seconds, then stops as they fly in canopy. Crescendo flashes repeat after 4-5 seconds of darkness. Females flash from ground or while flying swiftly.	"Big Scaries" are females, who lure males of other species and eat them to gain chemical defenses. Many <i>Photuris</i> females do this and are called <i>femme fatales</i> .
Christmas Lights Firefly	<i>Photuris tremulans</i>	June to July	After dark, from 45 minutes after sunset, peaking before midnight but can go until dawn	Forest edges; open areas by trees or hedgerows, often near water	Greenish, bright	Males emit vibrating, second-long flash, up to every 4 seconds, flying quickly and low in open areas. In trees and fencerows, they flash more frequently. Females respond with short, single flashes.	These fireflies look like Christmas lights in the trees when males are gathering in large numbers.
Changeable Firefly, Variable Triple Flash	<i>Photuris versicolor</i>	June through July	Late dusk into the night	Woods' edges, fields, yards	Yellow-green	Quick triple flash in less than a second, repeating every 5 to 10 seconds. Male rapidly flies horizontally across open areas at or above head height. Females flash in undergrowth.	Can be similar to other <i>Photuris</i> , a genus considered difficult to identify to species.

*This document is a work in progress, based on local iNaturalist sightings, which provide clues about what types of fireflies we might be able to find in our community. Species information is synthesized primarily from Lynn Faust's *Fireflies, Glow-worms, and Lightning Bugs: Identification and Natural History of the Fireflies of the Eastern and Central United States and Canada*, but I also consult Firefly Atlas (fireflyatlas.org), Firefly.org, a book called *Silent Sparks* by Sara Lewis, scientific studies, and other sources. Howard County is also home to non-bioluminescent fireflies, or "dark fireflies"; they use pheromones instead of light to attract and find mates. If you have information to add or amend on this document, please get in touch through my website below or my email (nancy@humanegardener.com). Thank you for helping to keep our nights sparkling! —Nancy Lawson, 6/25/26