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Like a carpet of light, blue ghosts in the night

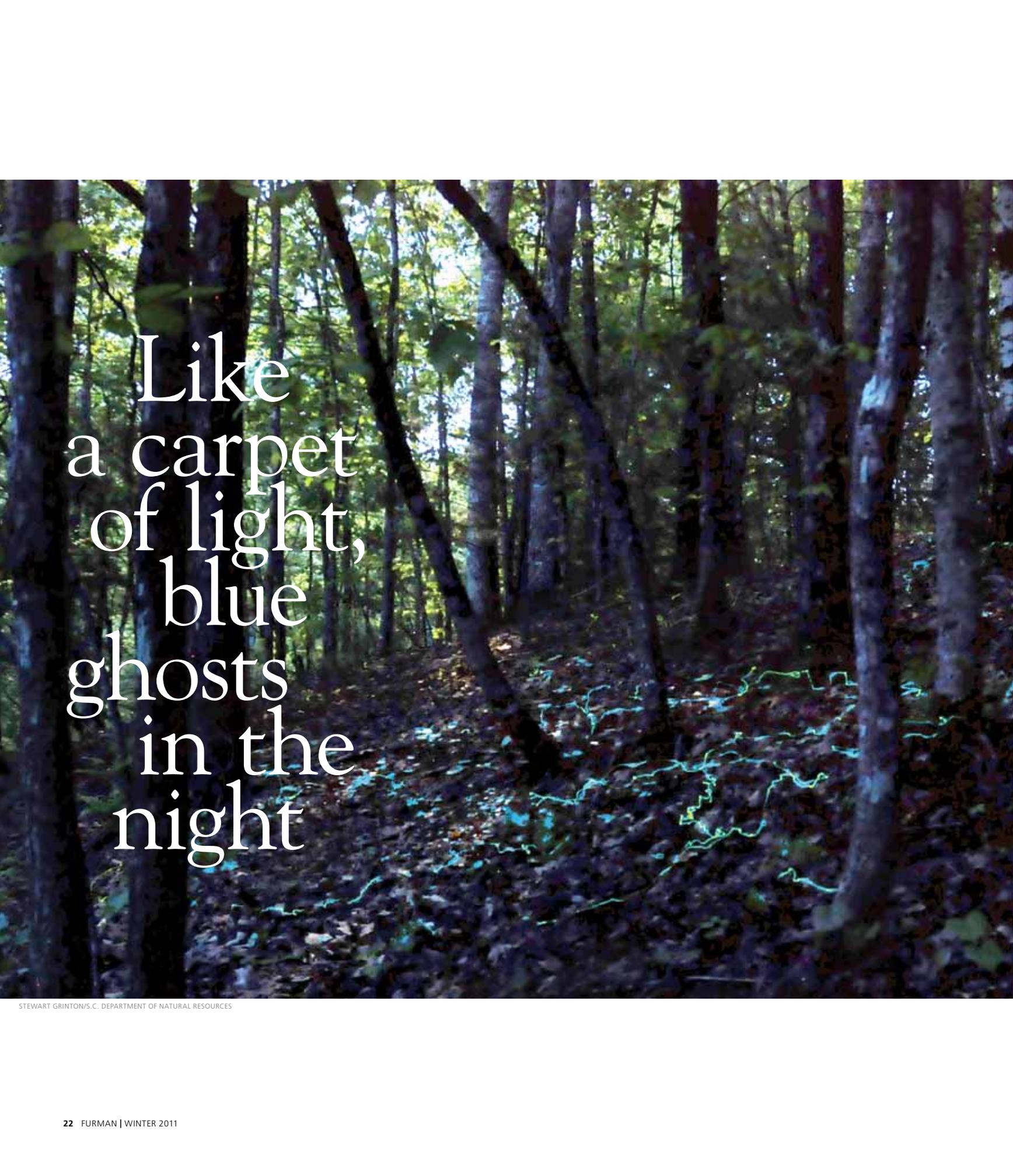
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A photograph of a forest floor covered in fallen leaves and glowing blue-green fungi. The scene is dimly lit, with sunlight filtering through the trees, creating a dappled light effect. The ground is covered in a thick layer of brown and orange leaves. Several bright blue-green, wavy, glowing lines of light are scattered across the forest floor, resembling bioluminescent fungi or a digital overlay. The trees are tall and thin, with dark trunks and green foliage in the background.

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STEWART GRINTON/S.C. DEPARTMENT OF NATURAL RESOURCES



When Don Lewis moved to his remote corner of Greenville County in 1975, he did it in part to keep his coveted connection with the natural world intact.

Since 1959, while still students at Furman, he and his wife, Bennie Lee Sinclair, had lived in a cabin they built on two acres of cutover timber land in Little Chicago, S.C., near the town of Campobello. But encroaching development had dirtied the creek that supplied their drinking water and chased away many of the animals they had called friends, leaving them searching for a new retreat.

They found it — and more — near Cleveland in northern Greenville County, just off State Highway 11.

Lewis is an acute observer of the outdoors, and during his first spring at his new home, at the base of where the Blue Ridge Mountains start climbing into North Carolina, he noticed something he'd never seen before. At the moment when the sun finally goes all the way down and the gray of dusk is replaced by the black of night, he noticed a light that shouldn't be. Actually, hundreds of lights — pale blue and unwavering, hovering just above the ground.

Transfixed, he had witnessed for the first time the mating ritual of the *Phausis reticulata*, a little known insect also called the “blue ghost firefly.”

“I knew there was something different about them,” Lewis says. “For about 10 years I suppose I couldn't find out anything about them. Nobody I'd talk to had ever seen these things.”

Unlike the more common fireflies with blinking yellow lights that children chase during the summer, blue ghost fireflies emit a steady glow. And while not uncommon in the southern Appalachians, they aren't seen often because they require fairly mature

forests to survive and are susceptible to weather extremes.

“These guys are about half the size of a regular summertime lightning bug. They look very much the same. In good years they'll be here for about six weeks, but that's not guaranteed,” says Lewis, who adds that the fireflies begin to appear around April 15. “They can get killed off by certain rain events, a severe thunderstorm in the afternoon or the evening.”

Lewis' prowess as a potter is well known, but over the past two decades the blue ghost firefly has come to define his life just as much. He's created a website (www.doiop.com/fireflyforest) to document what he sees, and each spring he sends alerts to friends and interested observers so they can witness the phenomenon.

Despite their uniqueness, the fireflies haven't been subjects of much scientific study. “What's on my website is what I've been able to deduce about them over the years,” says Lewis.

Jennifer Frick-Ruppert, an associate professor of ecology and environmental studies at Brevard College in North Carolina, recently co-authored only the third scientific paper on *Phausis reticulata*. “I enjoy talking to Don because he is such an enthusiast,” she says. “He makes some good observations.”

Two springs ago, Pam Burgess Shucker '69, Lewis' longtime friend, made the trek to Cleveland to see the fireflies. The show started promptly at dark.

She wrote of her experience, “The eerie, hauntingly beautiful blue lights began to flick on one at a time. I attempted to follow each pale blue flash through dark so complete I often bumped into the person beside me. At the end of an hour, thousands of ghostly blue sparks lit the black woods as if haunted matches flared. . . . The event proved a spectacular experience and memory for me.”

She's not alone. In recent years, more and more visitors have made it a point to brave Lewis' twisting, one-lane gravel drive to watch the blue ghosts do their thing.

“There's no way to know how many [fireflies] there are going to be. I've seen thousands, and when there are that many of them it's like a carpet of light,” says Lewis. “I've had cars parked in every possible space out there. The great fear is to have one last car come in that can't turn around.”

Because the females don't fly, the fireflies aren't good at finding new places to live, which is a problem in an area where, until recent years, human encroachment was destroying their habitat at a breakneck pace. Whether that will have a long-term impact on their population remains to be seen, but Lewis is determined to ensure that *Phausis reticulata* will always have a home on his 122-acre homestead.

“Some friends and I formed a non-profit corporation called Friends of Firefly Forest, and I intend to leave this place to the corporation in my will. Hopefully they'll keep it going forever,” Lewis says. “But even if they don't, if something should happen to the corporation and it should go out of business, the corporation or a judge, whichever one it takes, will give this place to a like-minded conservation organization. That's the best I can do.”

— RON WAGNER

The author, a 1993 graduate, is a freelance writer in Hendersonville, N.C. A former Furman baseball player, he was the right fielder for the Asheville (N.C.) Diamondbacks baseball club that won its second straight Men's Senior Baseball League Fall Classic championship in Jupiter, Fla. The D'backs captured the 2010 35-over American Division championship with a 7-0 record after winning the 35-over Central Division title in 2009.