

BRANSCOMBE PROJECT – HISTORY SNIPS

Barbara Farquharson: *Do you remember glow worms in the Branscombe hedgerows? I remember a wonderful string of them on the road-side from Hooken down towards the sea. Then, some years ago, they vanished. Too much light pollution. Has anyone seen them since the quietude of Lockdown? Animals are very good at reappearing, even after many years. Here's a snip from the Coronavirus diary kept by the Portuguese novelist Gonçalo M. Tavares:*

From the village they're telling me about the appearance of the fireflies.

A natural light source.

Also known as lightning bugs.

Lampyrid, from the Greek. Lampein: to shine.

Other names: fire beetle, glow worm, noctiluca, lantern fly.

Animal that produces light ...

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Here, Patrick Dillon, cultural ecologist, takes us in search of glow worms at Weston Mouth:



Glow worms were wonders of my childhood. They lit up the dry chalk valleys where I lived. In recent years their numbers have declined alarmingly. Since moving to East Devon, I have often thought the small cliff-side meadows which are dotted along the coastline would be good places for glow worms. A few years ago, we decided to have a look. We chose an early July evening to search the valley that runs from the Donkey Sanctuary at Trow to Weston Mouth between Salcombe Regis and Branscombe. The valley comprises about 1.5 km of gently sloping small meadows fringed by woodland. With some limestone in the underlying geology, this looked like prime glow worm habitat.

The walk down was not promising. The meadows have overgrown since I last came this way and the ground cover looked too dense. Glow worms need some open ground so that their yellow-green 'glow', which is produced by a light-emitting molecule, a form of 'bioluminescence', can be seen by a mate. Glow worm is the colloquial name for the wingless females of the beetle *Lampyris noctiluca*. They 'glow' to attract a male.

We arrived at the beach at about a quarter to ten. This is an isolated area with no direct access by road. It is a 30 minute walk to reach it, with a steep run of steps at the bottom of the valley. There are two small cottages above the beach. One of them had two people sitting outside; otherwise the long stretch of coastline was deserted. It was too early to look for glow worms so we collected stones on the beach with the intention of walking back up the valley as dusk turned to night to look for our quarry. As we were leaving, at about quarter to eleven, the man from the cottage came out to collect driftwood. He told us that he had had the cottage for over 20 years and came every summer. I asked if he had ever seen glow worms. Yes, he said, last night, over there, pointing to a small raised platform with sparse vegetation just above high tide which had once been the site of a cottage. We sat on a log at the edge of the platform and waited as the light faded. Almost immediately we saw the first faint green glow. The man and his partner joined us and we found two more over the next half hour. The couple told us that there used to be many more glow worms, especially on the track we had walked down, but that recently the management of the land had changed and the beetles had gone.

A glow worm survey has been running for some time: <http://www.glowworms.org.uk/>. The website reports sightings of glow worms up and down the

country, but nowhere are they common. Given the disastrous decline of insects generally, I am interested to know how the glow worm is faring locally. The abandoned 'plats', the small cliff-side fields near Branscombe where early potatoes were once grown seem to me to offer an ideal habitat. What memories do people have of glow worms? Where are they still to be found?