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A Science Service Feature

? WHY THE WEATHER ?

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THE "RARITY" OF IGNIS FATUUS

The Oxford Dictionary, under "ignis fatuus," says: "It seems to have been formerly a common phenomenon, but is now exceedingly rare." This is a curious statement. Animals and plants become rare and even extinct, but we hardly associate these processes with a physical phenomenon, such as ignis fatuus is generally supposed to be. However, the idea of its increasing rarity is frequently met with in literature. As far back as the year 1845 a writer in the Penny Magazine expressed the same notion in the following words: "Most persons are aware of the fact that the moving lights called Will-o'-the-Wisp, or Jack-o'-Lantern, were much more frequently seen and talked of in former years than they are at present."

The truth of the matter probably is that observations of ignis fatuus were always rather rare, but that at any given time they were thought to have been previously common; just as the delusion has always prevailed that the "old-fashioned winter" was once the rule rather than the exception.

There is no reason to suppose that will-o'-the-wisp is any less common today than it has ever been in the past, except, perhaps, in localities where the marshy grounds that seem to be its favorite habitat have been drained.

On the other hand, the scientific study of this phenomenon, which once was common, is now almost obsolete! Will somebody please tell us why?

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