Let there be night

Has unnecessary lighting become a new form of home invasion?

WHEN THOMAS Edison coaxed a carbonized cotton thread to burn for 14 hours in October of 1879, he lit the world—and murdered sleep.

One hundred and thirty-four years later, nearly 9 million Americans have to take pills to fall asleep, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, and a quarter of us sleep poorly even after we do. For this, we can blame stress and Starbucks, yes. But we must also blame artificial light, which disrupts ancient and essential rhythms. Artificial light also kills birds and bats, wastes tax dollars, obscures the stars, and, as the enabler of third-shift work, is a “probable carcinogen.” Our electrifying hero is morphing into a villain.

In his new book, “The End of Night,” Paul Bogard assesses the ills of a society in which everything is illuminated. “Already, some two-thirds of Americans and Europeans no longer experience real night—that is, real darkness—and nearly all of us live in areas considered polluted by light,” he writes.
In New England, we are particularly afflicted. Look at the World Atlas of Night Sky Brightness, a catalog of satellite images taken at night. The region is ablaze with orange and green, indicative of a wealth of urban centers, but a poverty of dark skies.

This is not a new development. In the classic “The Outermost House,” which describes a sojourn on Cape Cod in the 1920s, Henry Beston decried a civilization “full of people who have not the slightest notion of the character or the poetry of night, who have never seen night.”

This was eight years before the Rural Electrification Act was signed.

The problem is not that we have artificial light, but too much light that is unnecessary or poorly designed, Bogard says. In researching the book, he visited Concord and learned about the public outcry that occurred when the town turned off more than a third of its streetlights. The author was mystified. “In Concord I found a friendly New England town,” he wrote, “and not any place where you would expect to be attacked by a violent predator. And yet, here were glaring streetlights that did as much to impair my vision as they did to brighten my way.”

An irony: The lights that are supposed to keep us safe—the incessant halo of streetlights, the high-powered spotlights affixed to our neighbors’ roofs—have become a new form of home invasion.

As darkness becomes more elusive and therefore more precious, savvy communities are taking advantage, and dark-sky tourism is taking off. In Quebec, the Mont-Mégantic Observatory was the first site to be recognized as an International Dark-Sky Reserve by the International Dark-Sky Association. Places as diverse as Tanzania and the Isle of Man in the Irish Sea are luring tourists with promises of black skies streaked with thousands of stars that many urban Americans don’t even know exist.

Closer to home, Bogard spent some time sky-gazing at Cadillac Mountain in Acadia National Park in Maine. “This place gives me hope,” he writes. “Here in the East, not six hours from Boston, a place where for millions of people each year, the beauty and mystery of night can be brought within reach.”

A visit might not help us sleep at night, once we return to the green-and-orange hues of the light-polluted realm in which we Bostonians live. But it will at least remind us of the time, a couple of million years ago, when our circadian rhythms worked just fine, and we got all the melatonin we needed from our bodies—not the CVS that’s open 24/7.