

Fungus Among Us: Antrim as Mushroom Paradise

George Caughey

To paraphrase Charles Dickens, 2018 was the worst of times and then the best of times—fungally speaking—but allow me to provide a bit of background before explaining further.

The fact that Antrim is mycologically blessed is not nearly as well-known as it could or should be. The same variety of soils, exposures, drainage conditions and habitats—our swamps, floodplains, pastures, shrubland, mature forest and mountain balds, which support a range of wildlife and a particularly rich mix of plants and trees—also enable growth of many different types of fungi. Like most living things, mushrooms and other varieties of fungi can be very particular about when and where they will grow. Many of the big fleshy mushrooms that are familiar to anyone who walks our woods grow in association with the roots of selected living trees. They are so-called mycorrhizal mushrooms, becoming intimately associated with and, in effect, extending the roots, and thereby helping the tree by improving access to nutrients. Almost all of our trees have mycorrhizal partners, and often more than one. Some of these partners, such as the lovely Painted Slipperycap (*Suillus spraguei*), associate with just one species of tree, in its case with Eastern White Pine, which explains why it is common here, but not, say, in Alabama. Another point to keep in mind about mycorrhizal mushrooms: most of them cannot be cultivated—not without planting a tree, anyway—and so if they are edible (and many are delicious!) they must be foraged in the wild. This provides one of the best excuses I know for getting out into the woods.

More than a thousand varieties of fungus with fruiting bodies (otherwise known as mushrooms) visible to the naked eye can be seen in southern New Hampshire—so many that try as you might you will never learn them all, and that challenge is part of their attraction. The woods and fields of Antrim are prime fungal territory. Of course, you are not

going to see every kind of mushroom every year. That will depend on conditions and luck, and some varieties are rarely encountered. Just because you don't see a particular mushroom doesn't mean it isn't there, for much of the year most types lurk largely unseen as mycelium—the white, stringy or cottony material you see inside a log or under a mat of leaves. Some years, if conditions are not right, the fungus, although very much alive, may opt not to send up spore-producing fruiting bodies at all, but just wait for better times. In 2018, by mid-summer, for many Antrim fungi, the time was right.

The late Spring and early Summer mushroom season started inauspiciously, with June and much of July being unseasonably dry, despite occasional torrential downpours—not great conditions for fruiting. Nonetheless, we did find our first Chicken of the Woods (*Laetiporus sulphureus*) “west of the pond” on June 7th, just as the black flies were tapering off, the snapping turtles were laying their eggs by the Gregg Lake inlet, and haying was underway at Bass Farm. It provided the first wild-picked fungal feast of the season. Chicken of the Woods grows exuberantly in large overlapping plates directly on wood, looking (when fresh) like huge yellow and orange-banded chunks of candy corn. This fungus, growing enthusiastically on a different log, despite multiple frosts and a recent light snow, was collected fully 5 months later on November 7th and provided what is likely our last freshly foraged fungal meal of 2018. As it happens, Chicken of the Woods is one of three edible fungi common in Antrim and named after fowl, the others being Chicken Fat (*Suillus americanus*, under Eastern White Pine) and Hen of the Woods (*Grifola frondosa*, also known as Miyataki), which is a choice edible that fruited this fall in spectacular sizes (20-pound specimens!) under oak and beech. Deer mushroom (*Pluteus cervinus*) also was com-

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A selection of mushrooms found in Antrim this year. From left, Coral Tooth (*Hericium americanum*), Russell's Bolete (*Boletellus russellii*), Chicken of the Woods (*Laetiporus sulphureus*), and Caesar's Amanita (*Amanita jacksonii*). Photos by George Caughey.

mon in Antrim's late Spring, but not much else apart from overwintering, wood-rotting perennials like Tinder Fungus *Fomes fomentarius*, which has been in the news because it was carried in a fire-starting kit by Ötzi, the 5300-year old Tyrolean Iceman found frozen in the Alps).

By July 1st, perhaps our biggest fungal fruiting body, of Berkeley's polypore (*Bondarzewia berkeleyi*), began to push up at the base of Red Oaks. Many Antrimites surely have marveled at this exuberant tan-yellow fungus, which can reach the size of a Great Brook student, only to die back completely in the Fall. Reliably, it will return next year, in the same place, and unfortunately may hasten the demise of the tree it grows under and infects.

There is neither sufficient time nor enough ink to discuss each of the hundred-plus species of fungi encountered this year in Antrim's woods, especially after the steady rains began to arrive in later July. Suffice it to say that they ran the gamut, from elegant (such as the Coral Tooth *Hericium*, growing out of cavities excavated by Pileated Woodpeckers) to bizarre (such as the Lobster *Hypomyces*, a fungus attacking a fungus), from fragrant (such as Chanterelles) to malodorous (notably, Stinkhorns, which emit the odor of carrion to attract spore-dispersing flies), delectable (such as porcini) to deadly (the white Destroying Angel *Amanita bisporigera*). Instead of the usual dominance of mushrooms with gills, there were an unusual abundance of mushrooms with teeth (especially the tasty Hedgehogs *Hydnum repandum* and *H. umbilicatum*) and fungi with pores (for example, Boletes).

Our lovely red and yellow Bicolor Boletes had a banner year, as did one of my nominees for Antrim's most attractive mushroom, Caesar's Amanita (*Amanita jacksonii*). Another mycorrhizal Amanita species, the Blusher (*Amanita rubescens*), was among the first large fleshy terrestrial fungi to appear after the rains in later July, in uncharacteristic abundance. My other nominee for Antrim's most attractive mushroom, the reclusive and rather uncommon Russell's Bolete (*Boletellus russellii*), graced us with special appearances.



Berkeley's Polypore (*Bondarzewia berkeleyi*) and Milo.
Photo by George Caughey.

We were additionally grateful for encounters with several types of prized Yellow Chanterelles (great with green beans or eggs), and also of porcini (King Bolete, *Boletus edulis*), which among the many mushrooms eaten by Italian peoples, are perhaps their favorite. Last and certainly not least, it was a huge year for trumpets/Black Chanterelles, which we plucked and heaped in piles from mid-August to late October, for routing to our dehydrator and ultimately to winter-time pizzas and pasta sauces.

Yes, it was a big and exceptional year, with notable fruitings of multiple edible and esthetically commendable fungi—altogether the stuff of legend. Some day when I am an old geezer (okay, my sister says that I am one already) sitting around the stove with younger, spryer pickers, reliving hunts of yesteryear, I'll be able to say: "You think this is a good mushroom year? Why, you should have seen 2018!" ❁

Thank you ...

to Richard Verney, owner of the Monadnock Paper Mills, for his generous donation of the paper on which the *Limrik* is printed.



218 Pleasant Street
Antrim NH 03440
603-588-6637
thewoolroomnh@tds.net

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