

# Searching for the Elusive **Slime Mould**

WORDS & PHOTOS BY ART WEAVER

2017 was for us, the Year of the Phenomenal Fungi. It was the year that the wildflowers and waterfalls we enjoy so much took a back seat to the new-found obsession of fungi. We are a small group of dedicated hikers that take advantage of the Bruce Trail and the various parks and conservation areas adjacent to the beautiful Niagara Escarpment.





▲ *Mycena leaiana*, Orange Mycena, are small dainty mushrooms that are obviously tasty to slugs.



▲ *Hydnellum peckii*, Bleeding Tooth Fungus, may look like its name, but “tooth” refers to the tiny spikes on the underside.



▼ *Exidia glandulosa*, Black Witches Butter, looks like a glob of tar, making it easy to overlook.

**W**e've always been hyper-interested in the scenic beauty and the flora and fauna making up the natural areas of the Niagara Region. We take hiking seriously staying out up to three hours regardless of the weather. Unlike some groups that forge ahead without break, we don't hesitate to

stop and examine delicate flowers or a breathtaking waterfall. Our group is made up of the Weaver clan, myself, wife Kerry, sister Priscilla and two dedicated friends, Bart and Jagg.

We've always found mushrooms and fungi fascinating and would stop to examine the occasional bright orange mushroom with

white scales, delicate pear-shaped puffballs scattered along a mossy log or rainbow-coloured fungus carpeting a stump. Collectively, we would call all of these unique plants “fungi”. Being the designated group photographer, I would take a picture or two of each just for the records, the same as I would Virginia Bluebells or any other natural beauty.

2017 was a record year for rainfall in Niagara as it rained consistently through the spring, summer and fall. This produced ideal conditions for spectacular waterfalls, fabulous flowers and fungi. That ultimately made 2017 an incredible year for mushrooms, fungi, slime moulds and all of their Saprophyte relatives.



▲ *Cantharellus cibarius*, Chanterelle Mushroom, is called the Angus beef of mushrooms and is very edible.



▼ *Dacrymyces palmatus*, Orange Jelly Fungus, is not very big but easy to spot because of its fluorescent orange colour.

Saprophytes, unlike regular plants, are organisms that do not require chlorophyll and obtain their nutrients directly from dead or decaying organic matter.

As the year unfolded, we became increasingly aware of the proliferation of fungi everywhere we hiked. Their attraction drew us further and further off trail following

large families of brilliant yellow Chanterelles or large bracketed fungus looking very much like Disney characters. As we looked closer at the fungi and the surrounding environment we began noticing two things, up close each fungus held incredible little secrets that required the use of a macro camera setting to expose them and

second, they were not alone. We were following the obvious fungi but there were many tiny and delicate members of this huge family such as the *Mycena* or *Coprinus* genus that we would normally miss if we stuck to the trail. This led us to ultimately discover the hidden worlds of coral, toothed and jelly fungi and of course the elusive slime

moulds. The smaller they were, the more interesting they became. We found ourselves searching tree crevices, in the shadows of decaying logs and under forest clutter to uncover the next little gem. Some of them were beautiful in their own creepy way while others looked so alien, we hesitated to touch them lest we become pod people.



▲ *Phyllotus porrigens*, Angel's Wings, can cover a log by the dozens.



### Incredible Variety

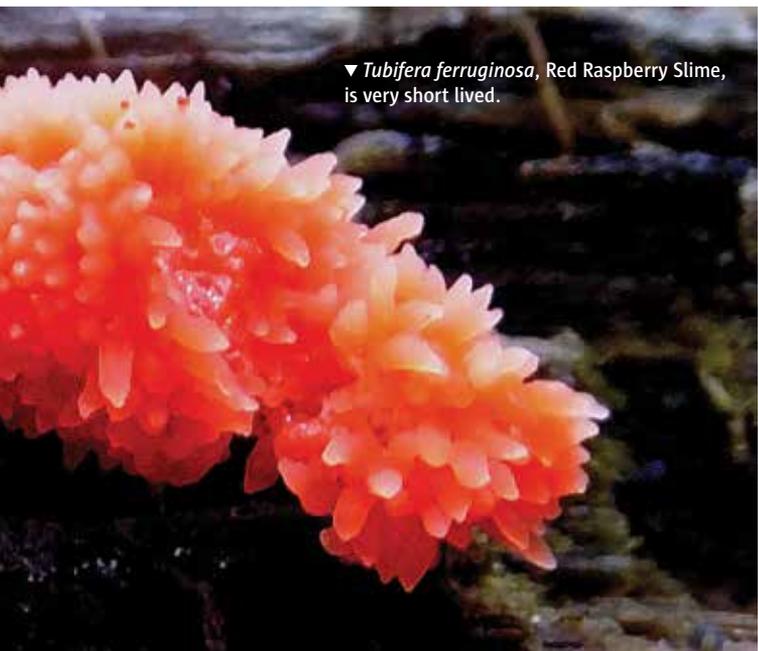
We were totally hooked. With descriptive common names like Bleeding Tooth Fungus, Black Witches Butter, Angel's Wings or our favourite Dog Stinkhorn, how could they not be interesting? At first, we had no idea what we were looking at and started inventing our own naming system based on colours, shapes and unique details such as "snow flake fungus" or "pizza top".

We purchased a couple of

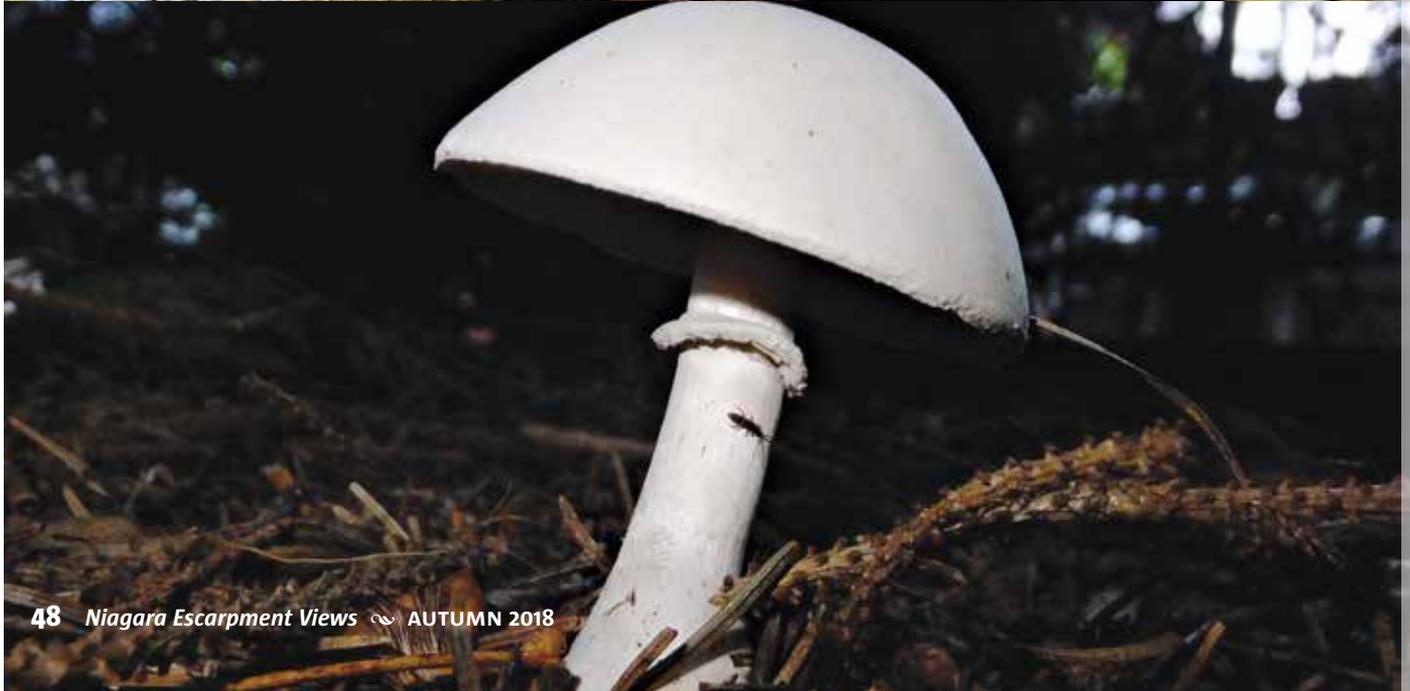
mushroom books and used professor Google liberally to help us but soon realized that one or two photos were not enough to nail down an identity. The variety that can occur within each species is incredible. Strong variations occur from one general location to another and even within each location. Location parameters might include exposure to sun versus shade, food sources, moisture and even wind

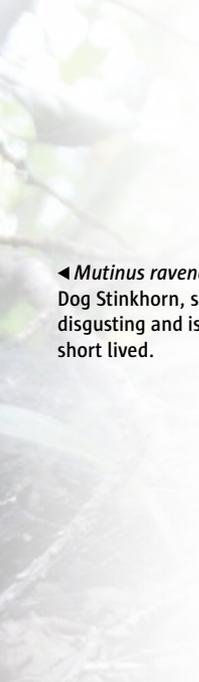
exposure. Influences specific to a site might include pests, human traffic or adjacent plants and objects that could restrict growth or cause malformations.

We also quickly realized that the main problem facing pretty much every fungus is slugs. It became difficult to take a clean picture of any fungi without either a slug or two photo-bombing the picture or the fungi showing evidence of their

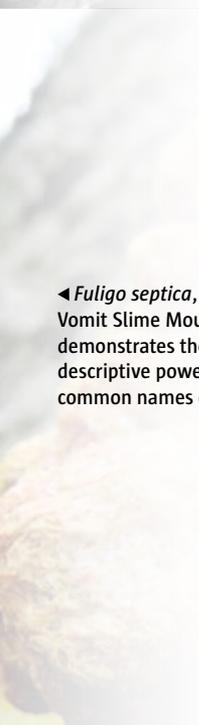


▼ *Tubifera ferruginosa*, Red Raspberry Slime, is very short lived.

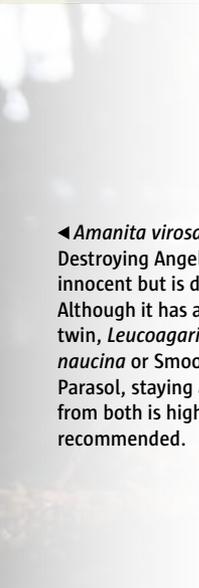




◀ *Mutinus ravenelii*, Dog Stinkhorn, smells disgusting and is very short lived.



◀ *Fuligo septica*, Dog Vomit Slime Mould, demonstrates the descriptive power of the common names of fungi.



◀ *Amanita virosa*, Destroying Angel, looks innocent but is deadly. Although it has an edible twin, *Leucoagaricus naucina* or Smooth Parasol, staying away from both is highly recommended.

voracious appetite with chunks missing. Often we were able to narrow identification down to only the genus and not a species or subspecies.

Capturing the beauty or *sui generis* of each fungus presented a number of challenges. I used a Fuji point-and-shoot camera due to its quality versus compactness while hiking but had to understand its limits. Sometimes a subject's unique personality was obvious but other times it required study. Once established, angle and proximity were the next questions to consider. Establishing these parameters I then had to determine if I could actually get in position for "the shot". If so, would I have enough light or was the background complementary?

The majority of the time I found myself on the ground, even lying down. I was secretly improving my conditioning by adding 500 squats to a 10-km hike. Kerry and Priscilla were the spotters, yelling "over here", "no, look at this" and they kept me hopping as I would try to record them all. We also learned that we had a narrow window of opportunity because fungi have a very short life span. You could return the next day to find a small pile of brown goo.

### Caution

We tried our best to respect these denizens of the forest floor and tread very carefully. We would not pick them or dissect them and were far too apprehensive to ever eat them. We know of certain species that are totally edible such as the Chanterelles but they are so beautiful in their environment we wouldn't. We won't even expose their location to anyone for fear others may not share our reverence.

Adversely, last summer, we discovered a perfectly formed white mushroom under one of our Spruce trees. Its simple beauty was inviting so we did a little research uncovering its name as "Destroying Angel", one of the most poisonous mushrooms in Ontario. I wouldn't even touch it and it goes to show just how easy it is to make a deadly mistake with these beauties. **NEV**

*Art Weaver has a background in landscape architecture and trail running. Now he hikes twice a week with his wife and sister through Niagara to Hamilton. They always make time to enjoy natural beauty like fungi.*