

Wet Weather Perfect... for Fungivores!



A “false” coral fungus, this species of *Tremellodendron* (a *Tremella* found on decaying wood), looks a lot like a true coral fungus but is really a variation on a jelly fungus.

Texas weather seems to swing from the sublime to the ridiculous: one year it’s hot and dry and the next it’s still hot but so wet that you can work up a sweat just standing in the shade. Some wise commenta-

tor once observed that “climate is what you expect but weather is what you get” and I guess they’re right.

The common denominator here, of course, is the heat, but the quality of the heat makes a major differ-

ence to the natural world around us. Most woody plants, for one example, can take the heat if they have a ready source of soil moisture to offset the losses from their leaves. Betcha didn’t know that plants sweat, eh?

Our recent and continuing rains—here at the Biology Station we’ve had more than 27 inches so far this year, about 70% of our annual average, less than half way into the year (contrast that with this time last year when we had had barely 30% of average)—have brought out a number of organisms that we don’t often see: a fairly broad variety of mushrooms and other fungi.

The mushrooms and fungi—sometimes called “the fifth kingdom” because they’re neither plant, animal, single-celled or microscopic—are largely invisible most of the time. They only become visible when their fruiting bodies, the mushrooms and other visible things that we consider “fungi,” develop. And conditions have to be just right for them to fruit.

Some of the rarer types that I’ve been seeing lately are often called “jellies” because they’re generally rubbery and shapeless though some can resemble brains, ears, and coral or have other shapes. These, like most fungi, need wet conditions to fruit but are quite sensitive to, and need, relatively high humidity to then set their spores.

Most take their nourishment from decaying wood but some, like the *Tremellodendron* that I’ve been seeing a lot of over the past week, appear to be growing on the forest floor (though in reality they’re growing on a buried piece of wood). They’re pretty amazing to encounter along a forest path! You’re just whistling along, taking in the scenery and—bang!—there’s this 3 to 4 inch tall coral-looking thing where you least expect to see anything like it.

Another jelly I’ve been seeing lately, *Calocera cornea*, appears to prefer cedars and can often be found on cedar posts. A brilliant translucent yellow-orange, this one looks more “jelly-like” but still has that coral shape, though they’re generally less than one-half an inch tall.

There are plenty of the more traditional mushrooms, puff-balls, brackets and a few cup fungi out there, too. They’re interesting finds, can be fun (if a bit wet) to photograph, and—if you’re so inclined—can be collected to make spore prints and for the table. Beware, however, that unless you know what you’re doing, eating them may be bad for your health! Check out the “Field Guide to Texas Mushrooms” by Susan and Van Metzler (UT Press, 1992) to learn more. They are an intriguing and not-often seen part of the world around us.