

Learning to Appreciate the Geometry of Nature



The geometry of an orbweaver's web on a misty morning is awe-inspiring.

I've always been a fan of geometric patterns in nature (think of the spiraling coil of a snail's shell, for example) and this wet summer seems to be revealing more and more of these kinds of organic patterns. A recent misty morning (read: 100% humidity!) and the flurry of mushrooms taking advantage of the unusually wet season are two local examples.

Consider, as one example, the complex geometry of a spider's web. This past Sunday morning was one of those calm, humid mornings that revealed the usually hidden world of spiders—when mist and dew cover everything in sight it's amazing to realize how many and varied the constructs of

spiders can be. Of course, these rare occasions just cry "photo op!"

I don't know about you but spider webs can be pretty much of a nuisance. A wander out to the pond usually entails getting caught up in at least two or three of the sticky messes. The nice thing is that, after having webs repeatedly catch prey (me!) too large to chow down on, they soon learn to build their webs above our heads.

Still, on a morning like this it was pretty hard not to be awed by the incredible weavings of these small arthropods. The beads of dew along the lengths of silk reveal their stark beauty and, incidentally, make them a lot easier not to run into unannounced!



A tower of mushrooms on an oak stump echoes a man-made high-rise.

My second example is of yet another often unseen world—the growth of fungi in circles and other patterns is only revealed when mushrooms, their "fruit," pop up, seemingly overnight. Folklore would have us believe that "fairy rings" are the dancehalls of sprites and Tinkerbell's cousins. Even if they're not, the sight of a ring of mushrooms always intrigue me because they reveal a hidden underlying pattern.

Other patterns can be revealed when mushrooms erupt from wet substrates, too. I rarely gave the old oak stump beside the house more than a passing glance (other

than that it now hosts a pretty fair sized eastern persimmon, *Diospyros virginiana*, growing out of the middle of it) until one day a week ago or so when I noticed a half dozen towers of little mushroom condominiums on it.

The close growth of the individual mushrooms looked uncannily like parasols over the heads of the Marx brothers as they peer around the door frame (but maybe it's just me). Say it with me, photo op!

Keep your eyes open out there, the patterns of nature can make even a rainy-day hike enjoyable.