

Unusual Sightings

The Wasp's Nest Polypore

In a forested area near Concord, Massachusetts, I was recently engaged in one of my favorite pursuits—lifting up logs in search of obscure fungi—when I found what looked like a group of miniature wasp's nests under an old oak log. On a whim, I brought a few of them home, shaved off a section from one of them, and put it under the microscope. I was actually a bit surprised to find finely verrucose spores that measured 7–10 by 4–6 μm .

So what was this fungal entity? As I was trying to identify it, a phrase from Overholts's 1953 *Polyporaceae* book leaped out at me: "resembles in form a miniature wasp's nest." The species with this curious morphology was *Polyporus dependens*, which, according to Overholts, was "not known from more than a dozen collections." Both the macro and micro description in Overholts were consistent with my specimens. So, too, was Leif Ryvarden's description of the taxon's updated name, *Coltriciella dependens*, in *North American Polypores*. I mailed a few dried specimens to Leif himself, and he confirmed my ID, saying that the species was quite rare.

A few weeks later I returned to the same well-rotted *Quercus* log with photographer-arachnologist Joe Warfel. As Joe was taking perhaps the first-ever pictures of *C. dependens* in the field, I lifted an adjacent log and found several immature *Coltriciellas*. Whitish-grey and extremely hirsute, they were very different from the brown and only slightly hirsute mature specimens. Since I haven't been able to find any description of what an immature *C. dependens* looks like in any book or journal article, it's entirely possible that I could be the first to record it . . . here. And Joe's photos could well be the first to display its features.

In both forms, *C. dependens* has the same bizarre growth habit: it's stipitate, and yet it grows *under* a log, with the pore surface facing downward. This might seem a bit absurd, but one should never call a fungal growth habit absurd without the proper examination. In fact, I invariably found a space between the bottom of the well-rotted substrate and the ground in most specimens. When there wasn't a space, the fruiting bodies of *C. dependens* would respond by becoming more or less resupinate, with an abbreviated stipe.

Is *Coltriciella dependens* really a rarity, or has it just been overlooked? The answer is probably yes to both questions. The popular notion that a dead log or snag is an eyesore rather than a fertile habitat has probably contrib-



uted to its decline, as it has with a number of other wood inhabitants. At the same time, a relatively small species like *C. dependens* (the pileus is less than 1 cm in diameter) might easily be overlooked, especially when charismatic megafungi happen to be in the vicinity. To my way of thinking, however, a small, secretive species like *C. dependens* is just as charismatic as any of its more blatant fungal brethren. —Lawrence Millman

Photos: Joseph Warfel