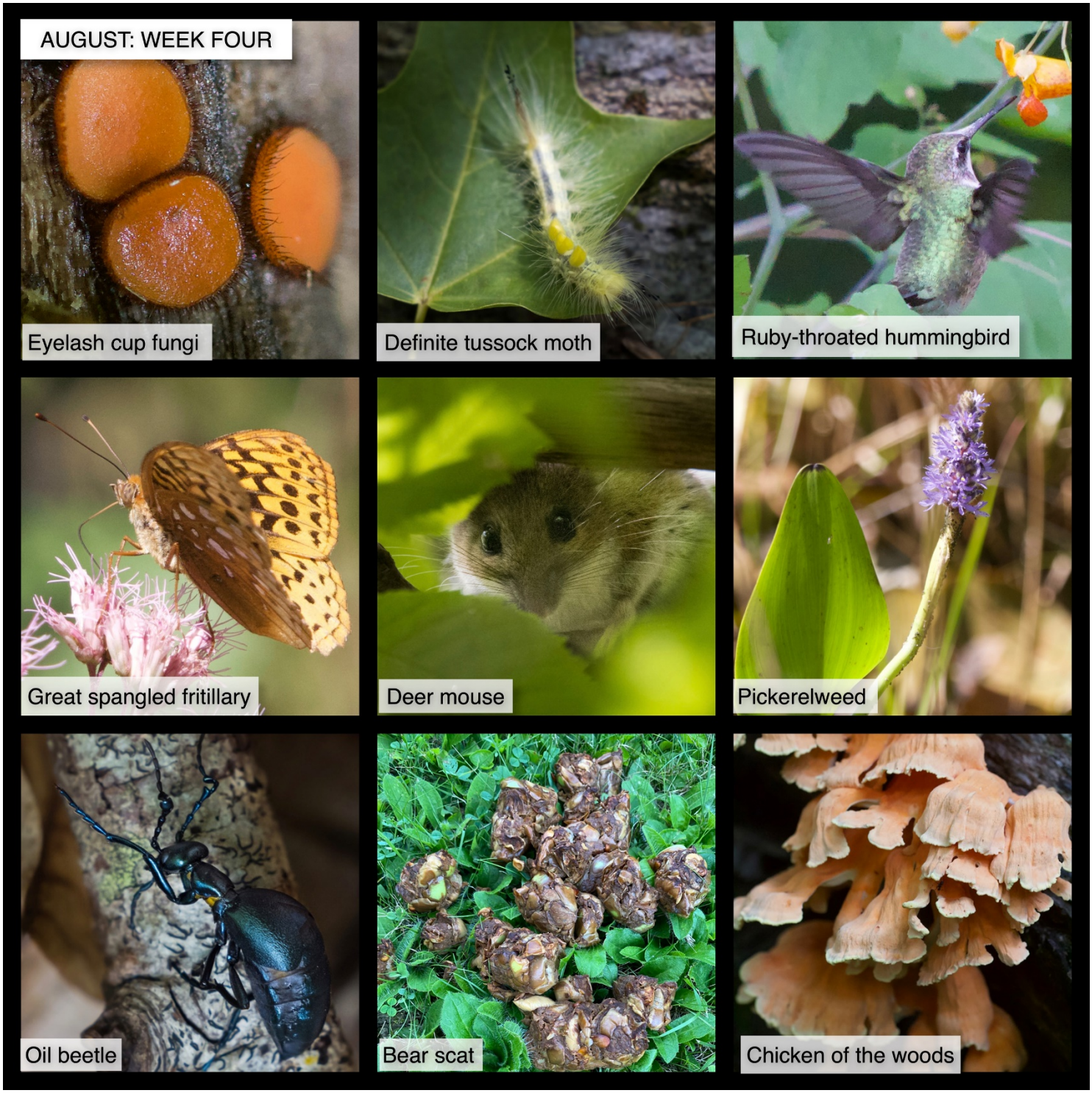
# This Week in the Woods August: Week Four




**This Week in the Woods,** the season has tipped toward early autumn, with the first turned leaves lying here and there on the forest floor. Fungi is abundant, including **eyelash cup fungi** – tiny pumpkin colored saucers ringed by hyphal hairs that, as the name indicates, look a lot like human eyelashes. Which is not creepy at all. Look for it growing on rotten logs, typically in clusters (you'll probably need magnification to see the hairs). Here's a fun photo from Mary

Holland's *Naturally Curious* blog of a slug munching on one of these fungi, which, she explains, are ascomycetes, meaning that they produce "spores within microscopic sacs." As for why a fungus needs a fringe, Lawrence Millman, in *Fascinating Fungi of New England*, writes that the hairs "may or may not help the fungus absorb moisture."

**Definite tussock moth caterpillars** are a common sight in late August into September, and feed on a long list of woody plants, including maple, oak and birch. Like many members of the tussock moth caterpillar club, they can cause skin irritation, which is no doubt the message of the bright yellow clumps of bristles on their backs. Here's a YouTube video demonstrating how these caterpillars move and explore their surroundings. Although eye-catching at this stage, they'll mature into easy-to-miss, dark brown moths.

For most of this summer, we have been trying to photograph **ruby-throated hummingbirds**. Finally, this week, one lingered long enough in a patch of jewelweed (featured two weeks ago, here) that we were able to get an image. These tiny, iridescent birds, mistaken by some early European settlers for giant bees, are "the epitome of avian energy." The quote is from Bryan Pfeiffer in this article from our archive, which also shares some fun hummer statistics, including wing beats: 70 per second, heart rate: exceeding 1,000 beats a minute, weight: about one-eighth of an ounce.

If you see a big, orange, spotted butterfly flitting around your meadow, and it clearly isn't a monarch or look-alike viceroy, then you're probably seeing a fritillary. And you should probably stop right there in your identification efforts. But for those who want to know, a **great spangled fritillary** is distinguishable by a combination of hard-to-see traits including, most notably, a pale band of color between its rows of white spots on its outside, closed wings. Here's a profile from the U.S. Forest Service, which notes that its hatched caterpillars don't feed, but overwinter in their larval state and then binge on spring violet leaves. When looking for a spot to lay their eggs, female butterflies "seem to be able to find the violets even after they have wilted and blown away. It is possible they can smell the roots of violets."

**White-footed mice** and **deer mice** can be hard to tell apart; one of the more (but not definitively) reliable ways is whether they have "gradually bi-colored" or "distinctly bi-colored" tails. We discovered this little guy on top of a tent, eating fallen seeds. He quickly scampered up a tree with a distinctly bi-colored tail trailing behind him, which puts him (probably) on Team Deer Mouse. Here's an *Outside Story* essay by Catherine Tudish from the first year of the series, describing both mouse species' winter preparations, and noting how they "split the night shift."

**Pickerelweed** – that spiky purple flower that sticks out of marshes and ponds – has significant wildlife value. As noted in this profile from Minnesota's Department of Natural Resources, this aquatic plant – a member of the water hyacinth family – provides food for a variety of creatures, from ducks to muskrats. It also helps prevent shoreline erosion, and provides habitat for fish, amphibians, insects and other creatures.

If you look closely at the photo of this **oil beetle** you'll see a bright yellow splotch behind its first leg, and another on the bark. This is a substance it exudes for defensive purposes, and it contains a toxin that blisters human skin. These insects (multiple species, and part of a bigger blister beetle group) have a complicated and violent start in life. As explained in detail in this article, their just-hatched larvae clump together and emit a bee pheromone, hop a ride on gullible male solitary bee, switch to a female bee, and eventually end back in the bee nest, where they eat the bee larvae before maturing into herbivores. Here's a cool BBC video of the bee parasitism process in the Mojave Desert (warning, not for the squeamish).

There was some staff discussion about whether apple-and-nut bedecked **bear scat** was an appropriate image for this series, but it's a common (and fun for kids to find) sign of the changing season, as our ursine neighbors start to fatten up to survive the winter. We have a number of articles in our archive related to bears and winter preparations; since Meghan McCarthy McPhaul is responsible for the photo, here's an *Outside Story* essay by her, interviewing bear biologist Ben Kilham about winter preparations. And here's another *Outside Story* essay (also quoting Ben) describing the importance of apple and nut crops to bears' fall diet, and how the availability of different foods shifts year-to-year, and affects how far bears roam.

**Chicken of the woods**, also called sulphur shelf, is relatively common in the late summer and early fall woods. It lives on rotten wood and, supposedly, tastes like chicken. Although it's a popular eating mushroom (note: there are actually several related species), there is also a look-alike that grows on conifers and can cause sickness. Here's a post from the Cornell Mushroom Blog including this point, and sharing the fun aside that, because of the fungus' habit of hollowing out the centers of trees, it was "known to damage the wooden ships of the British Naval Fleet."

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