

This Week in the Woods October: Week Three

OCTOBER WEEK THREE



Pear-shaped puffballs



Oil beetle



American copper



Waxy caps



Spotted cucumber beetle



Wolf's milk slime mold

This Week in the Woods, puffballs have ripened and want you to stomp them. A favorite among kids, these fungi produce millions of tiny spores inside their fruiting bodies. Once the spores are ready to go, the puffballs either crack open (as giant puffballs do) or develop holes at the top (as shown in this image of **pear-shaped puffballs**). Wind, rain, or snazzy pink hiking boots provide all the puff that is needed to send the pores into the air. If that wasn't enough to delight children, their genus name, *Lycoperdon*, means, more or less, "wolf flatulence." Here's an [Outside Story article about giant puffballs](#) by Madeline Bodin.

Here are some other nature sights this week (clockwise):

We found this big iridescent **oil beetle** clinging to a leaf at the edge of the woods, and on closer (cautious) inspection, noticed tiny dots of orange goo on its abdomen. As Rachel Sargent Mirus explained in this [recent *Outside Story* article](#), that orange stuff is hemolymph (basically, insect blood) and it's laced with "cantharidin, an exceptionally toxic compound that causes blisters on the skin of unwary humans." Mirus goes on to explain that oil beetles – and other species in the blister beetle group – ooze out their hemolymph when they feel threatened. The article also describes the hitchhiking, bee-parasitizing habits of blister beetle larvae. For another look at the insect, and more links about them (including a cool-but-graphic BBC video on the topic), [revisit this post](#) from August 2020.

We're still seeing **American coppers**. Despite their name, these small pumpkin-colored butterflies may have been introduced very early on from Europe. Look for them visiting the last blooming asters in meadows; they overwinter in chrysalis form, so the adults will disappear soon.

Apparently, it's "odd names referring to wolves" week. In recent woods walks, we've seen an abundance of pink and purple-gray **wolf's milk slime mold** growing out of rotten wood. Mary Holland, in this [post from her *Naturally Curious* blog](#), explains that the color difference has to do with age: the slime mold bodies start off pink and then darken. Note: a true (plasmodial) slime mold such as this species isn't a fungus, but a life form that starts out as numerous amoebas, which then come together to create a new organism.

We found a tiny but bright **spotted cucumber beetle** with all its legs firmly clasped around a blade of grass. Despite their name, these beetles feed on a variety of different plants, both as adults and as larvae (in grub form, they're called southern corn rootworm). They're often considered a pest, both because their feeding stunts plant growth and because they're vectors of bacterial wilt disease. On the plus side, they're native insects, and very pretty!

Finally, there's an abundance of brightly colored **waxy caps** growing in small clusters in moss and pushing up from soil under the leaves. As their name suggests, these small but often intensely-colored mushrooms have a waxy look. Another common trait is widely spaced gills. Although some species are edible, others are toxic, and they're really hard to tell apart; best just to enjoy their looks.

Our thanks to The Bailey Charitable Foundation and the Frank and Brinna Sands Foundation for helping to support this series.

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