

This Week in the Woods September: Week Three

SEPTEMBER: WEEK THREE



Fuzzy orange galls



Wild grape



Alcohol inky (Tippler's bane)



Fall webworm



Black bear cub in apple tree



Seedling ticks



Twistedstalk



Tooth fungus (Lion's mane)



Red maple

This Week in the Woods, we found fuzzy brownish-orange things on oak leaves. Elf bedroom slippers? Star Trek tribbles? Turns out, they're yet another example of weird looking growths that plants develop in response to female wasps depositing eggs. **Fuzzy orange galls** (that's really their name) are the work of tiny, non-stinging wasps. The galls serve as shelters for larvae. You can read more about them in this [article in the Bangor Daily News](#).

We noted **wild grapes** back in May, when they were just bare vines with flower-like leaf buds. The grapes are ripening now and are a favored snack for all kinds of wildlife, from songbirds to bears (pileated woodpeckers often nosh on them). Here's our [previous write-up about them](#), and here's a fun [Outside Story essay by Brett Amy Thelen](#), which answers the question: what happens to wildlife when all the autumn fruit ferments? Fun fact: as explained by Thelen, cedar waxwings have big livers, and "metabolize alcohol seven times faster than finches."

Alcohol inky caps start off as rather blah looking, bell-shaped mushrooms. When they're ready to release their spores, they start liquefying into goo, beginning with the edges of their caps and working inwards. There are several inky cap species that reproduce this way; what makes this one especially interesting is how it interacts with alcohol. If you drink alcohol within a few days before or after eating the mushroom, you're likely to get extremely sick. Hence its alternative name: **tippler's bane**. Here's a description by Rachel Feltman for New York University's [Scienceline student magazine](#), which includes this intriguing note about poisoning symptoms: "You might think it can't be *all that* bad, but I have it on good authority that it really, really is. Trust me, mycologists in grad school will try anything once..."

Those unsightly cobwebby masses on cherries and other trees are the work of **fall webworms**, which appear to be having a banner year. Although they disfigure trees by gobbling up leaves, these caterpillars (which eventually turn into pretty white moths) are not that harmful in the long run, because they're consuming leaves that were soon to fall anyway, and they leave the buds alone. Here's a [note about them from the Michigan University State Extension](#), making that point, and an [Outside Story essay by Michael Caduto](#) that explains that, although hairy caterpillars – including webworms – can be difficult eating for many birds, they pose no trouble to the black-billed cuckoo. When its stomach gets too clogged by old hairs, it just sheds its stomach lining and grows a new one.

A family of **black bears** have been visiting Assistant Editor Meghan McCarthy McPhaul's apple trees for the past few nights, feeding on the ripening fruit. We've already talked about bears preparing for winter in this column, [including links to past essays](#), last time we showed scat. And seriously, look at those ears. Here's a [link to the Kilham Bear Center](#) and a ["Rumble Strip" episode by Erica Heilman](#), interviewing Ben Kilham about his renowned research on bears, and his family's work to rehabilitate and release injured or orphaned cubs.

Steve Alden set forth on a four-mile mostly-off-trail hike in Lyme on Labor Day, and was nearing the end, "when I looked down at my pants to see five brown smudges." On closer inspection, he realized that each smudge contained hundreds of baby ticks. So yes, ticks are out there, although they haven't seemed to be as much of a plague this year as in some years. Here's [an article by Meghan McCarthy McPhaul](#) on **black-legged ticks** – both their lifecycle and the diseases that they can carry. As Steve so eloquently put it, "Aack!"

Twistedstalk is one of those small understory plants that you see all summer but don't much notice. However, it's turning yellow while many other plants are still green, so for the moment

it's eye-catching. Note the zig-zag stalk for which it's named. There are two kinds (lance-leaved and clasping) both with the same basic shape. Here's a [profile from The Native Plant Trust](#) for lance-leaved twistedstalk – the one featured in this week's grid.

There are several very similar-looking species of **tooth fungus**, also collectively known as **lion's mane** (our guess is that the especially tufty one that we photographed is comb tooth, *Hericium americanum*). These fungi feed on dead or dying wood, and they often produce fruiting bodies in early autumn. They're sought after by foragers. Here's a [link from the Missouri Department of Conservation](#) with additional images.

And finally, September 13 marks the last week of summer. The weather is turning, and **red maples** are already starting to show fall color. Here's an [Outside Story essay by Ted Levin](#) that explains how decreasing daylight back in July triggered nitrogen reabsorption from tree leaves, and how cool September nights – like the ones we've been having recently – cause the cells at the base of leaves to dry out.

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