



OAKLAND
COUNTY PARKS

The Wilder Side of Oakland County

by Jonathan Schechter

Chicken of the Woods!



Chicken of the Woods (*Laetiporus sulphureus*) is one of my favorite mushrooms that grows in the woods of Oakland County. I look at this eye-catching fungus as an old friend of mine. However; I had never even heard of these delectable mushrooms until my freshman year at Goddard College in Plainfield Vermont when I discovered their existence in a botany class. We collected and pan-fried them and my gastronomical love affair with this polypore fungus delicacy began. It never ended. (a)

Of note, you won't find Chicken of the Woods growing in a field or a lawn. A polypore fungus is a mushroom that grows on tree trunks or stumps and has tiny holes or pores on the bottom. They are sometimes called a shelf fungus because they grow close to the ground and stick out from the tree bark like small shelves; sometimes one stacked almost on top of another.

Last summer I feasted on them after discovering a healthy patch of them in the woods a few hundred yards from the South Manitou Island lighthouse of Sleeping Bear Dunes National Lakeshore. Some of those ended up in my morning omelets during my month-long tour of duty on the island as a lighthouse keeper.

A few weeks ago I noticed squishy yellow "blobs" near the base of one of my black walnut trees and that was exciting. I knew what they were and they would soon turn into orangish-yellow "shelves" of edibility. The time had arrived to monitor and then harvest Chicken of the Woods!

Chicken of the Woods is bright orange when mature and found across the hardwood forests of our county from late spring through autumn however weather conditions greatly influence their appearance and speed of growth. Rain and warmth accelerate their growth; an extend dry spell puts a halt on growth.

They grow in stacked overlapping clusters on dead or dying trees, especially oak and black cherry. They earned their name because their cooked texture and flavor is said to bear a resemblance to real chicken however, I really don't think they taste like chicken!

With their brilliant orange color and meaty texture, this tree-hugging fungi is the most identifiable and exciting edible mushroom if you find them at the right time. The fruiting body appears in various sizes as fan-shaped mushroom that are easy to spot growing in large brackets near the base of dead trees and on fallen logs. (b)

I'm excited to say they are appearing now in my woods. One cluster is on an old black cherry tree just about that a three-minute walk from my kitchen stove. Two weeks of warmth and a good rain worked their magic and yesterday was harvest day and today a few reached my frying pan. Others will be sauteed in butter and put away in ziplock bags in my freezer.

A word of caution if you search for Chicken of the Woods. This tree-hugging fungi is distinctive, delicious, and easy to identify making it a great first species for a novice fungal forager, but if you are not 100% sure of your find, leave it be and just enjoy your woodland hike.

There are numerous on-line recipes but this is the method I usually use for my cast iron pan. I clean them first to make sure there are no hiding insects; sometimes slugs or other insects may be on them. Then I slice them into small pieces about three inches long and as narrow as you wish and cook them thoroughly to decrease any chance of an upset stomach. Happy hunting for this woodland delicacy! (c, d)

Oakland County Parks staffer Jonathan Schechter is an avid "nature-embracing" hiker who follows phenology - the study of natural cycles of nature's way - to inspire his blogs.