

## THE SULPHUR SHELF FUNGUS: A TREAT FOR THE EYE AND THE PALATE



*Sulphur Shelf bracket fungus, left and center, and the White-pored Chicken of the Woods, right.*

### Story and photos by Bill Roody

With its brilliant orange and yellow fan-shaped lobes and bright sulphur-yellow underside, the Sulphur Shelf bracket fungus is not likely to be overlooked. Also known as “Chicken of the Woods” or “Rooster Combs,” this beautiful fungus grows in compound shelf-like tiers on tree trunks, stumps and decaying logs, sometimes in spectacular overlapping clusters weighing several pounds.

If you look carefully you will see that the underside of the lobes is actually a thin layer of minute pore openings. It is within these pores that the microscopic reproductive spores develop. Easy to recognize and delicious to eat, the Sulphur Shelf is a favorite with mushroom hunters.

The presence of Sulphur Shelf on living trees is conclusive evidence that the tree is decaying. Long before the first colorful brackets appear, invisible thread-like fibers of the fungus, called hyphae (collectively known as mycelium), have penetrated the core of the tree. The hyphae secrete enzymes that break down cellulose and cause a gradual deterioration of the non-living central heartwood. This eventually weakens the tree, making it more susceptible to breakage or windfall during storms.

Although heartwood decay may

shorten the life of an individual tree, in a forest community this is but one element in the continuous process of life, death and recycling of organic matter that is essential to sustain a healthy, dynamic ecosystem. Trees that are hollowed out by woodrot fungi can remain alive and standing for many years, thus providing important shelter and homes for a variety of wildlife.

Once an infected tree falls, the Sulphur Shelf will continue to slowly decompose the remaining wood, reducing it to finer fragments that add to the humus and improve the soil for other life forms and new plant growth. The decomposition of fallen trees and stumps may take several seasons. Savvy mushroom hunters will return to a known site time and again to harvest fresh fruiting bodies.

The name Chicken of the Woods refers to the somewhat fibrous texture of the flesh, which is reminiscent of the breast meat of chicken. Some even think that it tastes like chicken. When very young, the entire fruiting body is tender and edible. As it ages, the flesh becomes more fibrous and indigestible, although the most recent growth at the outer margin of the lobes is often still tender enough to

harvest. Since allergies to various types of mushrooms are not uncommon, especially if they are eaten raw, the Sulphur Shelf should always be well-cooked and consumed in small amounts the first time it is tried.

On rare occasions, a few individuals have experienced stomach upsets when consuming alcohol at the same meal with the Sulphur Shelf. A related species that grows on conifers in the western U.S. is reported to cause illness when eaten. In West Virginia the Sulphur Shelf occurs on wood of broadleaf trees, especially oaks. The Sulphur Shelf can appear anytime from late May to early fall but is most frequently seen during the summer months.

The closely related White-pored Chicken of the Woods is very similar to the Sulphur Shelf and equally

tasty. It is white to buff on the underside, and typically grows in the form of a rosette at the base of trees or in soil around decaying stumps. The White-pored Chicken of the Woods is less common than the Sulphur Shelf, but both are widespread and exciting to encounter, especially when in pristine condition.

*Bill Roody is a seasonal biologist stationed in Elkins.*



*The Sulphur Shelf tastes delicious cooked.*