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## WAXCUP FUNGUS

A cropped portion of a photo by Mark Harder  
submitted to the 2019 GRNA Photo Contest

According to GRNA Education Director James Dake, the waxcup will always invert at some time to offer the view captured here.

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# YOU SHOULD GIVE A DARN ABOUT THIS SCARLET

(with apologies to *Gone With the Wind*)

by James Dake



If you have been walking in the woods lately, you may have noticed a change on the forest floor. The drab patchwork of grays and browns from last year's leaves is beginning its transformation into a colorful quilt. One of the first color changes you will see, with a bit of luck and a keen eye, is a splash of brilliant scarlet red. It is not a colorful spring ephemeral poking through the leaves, or a returning migrating bird, but an organism that is neither plant, nor animal. This beautiful and striking

sign of spring is part of its own special kingdom, one that cannot photosynthesize like plants or “eat” its food like animals. This special kingdom, of almost alien-looking organisms, is the Fungi Kingdom. The flashy sign of spring is the **Scarlet Cup** (pictured above).

Until around the 1960's, fungi were thought to be plants, and so they were classified that way. Recent DNA and biochemical studies have found they are more closely related to animals. For instance, the cell walls of fungi have chitin, a substance found only in the exoskeletons of insects and crustaceans. The Fungi Kingdom includes mushrooms, along with molds, yeasts, and mildews. Most of a fungus is underground or within the material in which it grows. This underground portion of a fungus forms networks, called mycelium, that produce enzymes and absorb nutrients. Some fungi, like Scarlet Cup, are saprobic and break down dead plants or animals. The spore-producing part of the fungus that pops up in the right conditions is the part that we see and often seek out.

Scarlet Cup (*Sarcoscypha austriaca & dudleyi*), sometimes called Elfcup, is a cup-shaped fungus, about 1-2” across that you can find growing from hardwood branches on the forest floor. Sometimes they are hidden beneath the leaves so you can only see bright scarlet red at just the right angle.

Now, as to why you should give a darn about them? Mushroom hunters love when they find Scarlet Cups, as they are usually a harbinger that the appearance of a regional favorite is just around the corner: **Morels**. Happy Mushroom Hunting!



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## MAY PROGRAMS

Stay at Home orders are still in place until at least May 15, so now what? May is when programs usually gear up at GRNA, and when we take time to prepare the trails and the Grass River Center for summer activities. We know at least some of that will not be happening in the usual way this year, but we are working on alternate plans. This is what we know so far.

**Spring Stream Monitoring** - This year we are scheduled to monitor Cold Creek, and while this will happen, it will not be done with groups of volunteers doing it all at once. Naturalist Emily Burke is working on the protocol for this along with Brian Thelen, our Land and Facilities Steward, and Bob and Sheridan Haack who identify and catalog the samples. If you are already trained in our stream monitoring protocol and are interested in helping in some way, please contact Emily at [emily@grassriver.org](mailto:emily@grassriver.org).

**Spring Stewardship Day** - This clean-up day previously scheduled for May 9th will not take place as an organized volunteer day, but Brian could still use some help to get GRNA

ready for summer. He will be emailing his regular volunteers soon with how this will all work, but if you have some time you want to give while social distancing, please email Brian at [stewardship@grassriver.org](mailto:stewardship@grassriver.org).

**Butterfly Training** - GRNA's in-person training is canceled for Saturday, May 16, but all is not lost. You can attend training online through the Kalamazoo Nature Center and the Michigan Butterfly Network on that same day. There is no cost to participate. [Click here](#) for more information and to register.

**Blooms & Birds: Wildflower Walks** - Our volunteer naturalist, Julie Hurd, is missing all of you as well as the beautiful wildflowers, so she sent us written descriptions of two early blooming flowers. Enjoy them below.

Programming beyond May 16th will be updated in our next newsletter, so stay tuned.

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## VIRTUAL BLOOMS & BIRDS: WILDFLOWER WALKS

with your guide, Julie Hurd

### **Marsh Marigold**

*Caltha palustra*



Marsh marigolds announce the arrival of spring as their golden blossoms fill the ditches along country roads. This large flowered member of the buttercup family is widespread in the new and old worlds and has more than 25 common names including “cow slip” and “May blob.”

Marsh marigolds have both culinary and medicinal uses. The large kidney- or heart-shaped basal leaves are iron rich but are toxic unless boiled in two changes of water. The bitter, poisonous component is volatile and is removed by boiling. Then the leaves may safely be eaten with butter and/or vinegar and are said to taste better than spinach. In addition, the immature flower buds may be gathered, pickled, and used like capers. Native Americans boiled and

mashed the roots to treat running sores. The plant has also been used to treat warts, congestive heart failure, and in cough syrup.

Find marsh marigolds at Grass River along the boardwalks of the Fern and Sedge Meadow Trails. The leaves persist into summer so watch for the large seed pods where the flowers once bloomed.

### **Trailing Arbutus**

*Epigaea repens*



The Trailing Arbutus is among the first wildflowers to bloom in early spring. Its woody stems creep along the ground and bear leathery, evergreen oval leaves 1-3” long. The five-petaled pink or white flowers are about 1/2” long and clustered at the ends of the stems. The blossoms exude a sweet, spicy scent which attracts bumblebee queens emerging from winter hibernation at a time when few other pollinators are active. After pollination, the fleshy white fruit develops from the flower. Remember to look for it in early summer; it might be hiding under the leaves.

As is the case with some other spring wildflowers, the seeds have elaiosomes – fleshy attachments – that draw ants that then carry the seeds to their nests. There the seeds are protected from being eaten by birds or other creatures and are fertilized by nest litter when they germinate. This is the plant’s primary mode of dispersal.

According to legend, the trailing arbutus was the first flower seen by the Pilgrims when they reached New England in 1621. It is sometimes referred to as the Plymouth Mayflower. In Colonial time bunches of arbutus were sold by street vendors in Boston, almost extinguishing some patches of the plants.

At Grass River, look for the trailing arbutus along the portion of the Fern Trail between the junction with the Woodland Trail (marker 12) and the junction with the Sedge Meadow Trail (marker 13). Kneel down and smell the flowers!

While enjoying the wildflowers, listen for the Morse code rat-a-tat-tat drumming of the Yellow-bellied Sapsucker. This small woodpecker makes small sap wells in living trees as a source of food. They also make a cat-like, repeated mewling sound.



*Thank you Julie for taking us on your  
delightful and informative tours!*

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## ACTIVITIES

### ***Microclasses added***

***Spend less than 15 minutes learning something new or  
refreshing your memory about the natural world.***

GRNA naturalist, Emily Burke, leads these video classes on YouTube. Click below to take the current classes, and look for new classes each weekend on Facebook and YouTube.

### **[Spring Ephemerals](#)**

### **[Trail Camera Wildlife](#)**

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While Michigan's Stay Home, Stay Safe order continues, we will publish *In Otter News* every other week to keep you informed, educated, and entertained. We will include the microclasses, some of the Fun in the Field activities from Facebook, and a lead article from one of our naturalists in each edition. We hope this helps to fill your days.

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## EARTH DAY OF GIVING

Grass River Natural Area wants to thank everyone who made a donation to us on Wednesday, April 22, our Earth Day of Giving. Our financial wellbeing is dependent on programming dollars and donations, and with the former sidelined for the time being, donations are of paramount importance. Your generous support is always greatly appreciated, but in these difficult days, your willingness to help us continue our mission with a personal donation promotes you to Earth Day Warrior status at GRNA.

If you still want to become an Earth Day Warrior , just remember

Every Day is Earth Day at GRNA

Grass River Natural Area is a nonprofit organization that has flourished for fifty years because of the generous support of people who value our mission "to manage the Grass River Natural Area, conserve and protect its watershed, and provide opportunities that increase knowledge, appreciation and community-wide stewardship of the natural environment".

If you believe in our mission and want to help us fulfill it for many years to come, please click on the Donate button below. Your support is greatly appreciated.

## DONATE



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