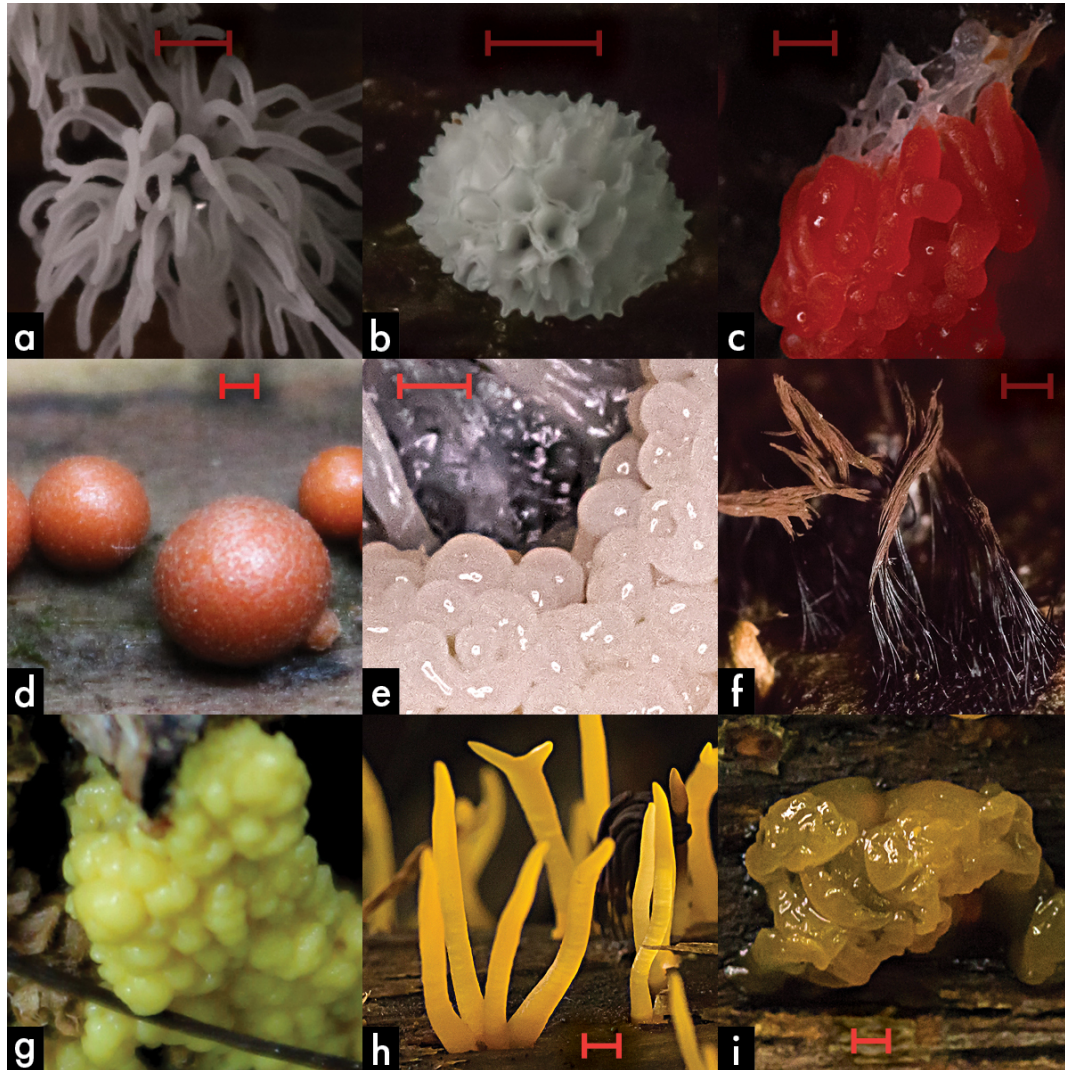


Slime Mold on Display in Greenbelt's North Woods

By Owen Kelley. Printed in the *Greenbelt News Review* on 2 July 2020, page 6.



During most of the year, there is at least something blooming in Greenbelt's forests, but summer is by far the best time to look for the tiny, intricate, and varied display put on by slime mold. Slime mold is the larger cousin of the amoeba that you studied under the microscope in high school Biology. Like the amoeba, a slime mold is neither a plant, animal, or fungus.

The easiest slime mold to find this time of year in Greenbelt's forests may be coral slime (*Ceratiomyxa fruticulosa*). During

part of its life cycle, coral slime has many white, translucent fingers that are only as tall as a penny is thick (1/16 inch), as shown in panel (a) of the accompanying photo. The red bar indicates 1/16 inch in each panel.

An area of several square inches may be covered with coral slime on a well rotted log. Such logs can be found lying across or near the informal trails in Greenbelt's North Woods. One place to start looking is along the trail that leads north from the end of the road at 12 Court, Plateau Place. If you do go

hiking, take precautions against ticks and watch out for poison ivy.

When left undisturbed, slime mold plays an important role in decomposing dead plant material, a process that fertilizes forest soil. Slime mold is delicate, and even a light touch might disrupt its intricate structure.

Botanists debate whether honeycomb coral slime (panel b) is a variety of coral slime (panel a) or a different species. In the former case, honeycomb coral slime would be called *Ceratiomyxa fruticulosa* var. *porioides*, and in the later case, honeycomb coral slime would be called simply *Ceratiomyxa porioides*.

Other slime molds growing in or near Greenbelt's North Woods include strawberry slime (*Tubifera ferruginosa*), wolf's milk (*Lycogala epidendrum*), tapioca slime mold (*Brefeldia maxima*), slime mold in the genus *Stemonitis*, and dog vomit slime mold (*Fuligo septica*), shown in panels (c)–(g).

There are several well-illustrated field guides to help amateurs identify the trees and wildflowers of Eastern US forests, but there is no such book for slime molds. Another identification challenge is that fungi may resemble slime molds. In the North Woods, one may encounter fungi called small staghorn fungus (*Calocera cornea*) or witches' butter (*Tremella mesenterica*), which are shown in panels (h) and (i).

Although it may be hard to believe, a slime mold goes through a phase of its life

when the structure that you see is a single large cell with many nuclei (panels b, c, e, g). In an earlier phase of its life, a slime mold's single large cell is capable of locomotion. In the last phase of its life, the slime mold's single large cell may produce countless tiny spores that are sometime visible as white fuzz or brown dust (panels and f).

It is easier to find slime mold in a natural forest than in a park where fallen trees are removed and the understory is a mowed lawn. In Greenbelt's Forest Preserve and GHI Woodlands, dead trees are left where they fall, creating microhabitats that persist for decades while a myriad of tiny creatures, including slime mold, return nutrients to the soil.

During the current pandemic, Greenbelters are walking in our town's woods and learning to identify what grows here. As the seasons change, there are always new things to look for.

The photos were taken by Owen Kelley, the author of A Hundred Wild Things: a Field Guide to the Greenbelt North Woods. This 244-page book was reviewed in the February 20, 2020, issue of the News Review (page 12). The book is available on BarnesAndNoble.com, from the Greenbelt Museum, and directly from the author at okelley@gmu.edu.