

Spring Foraging

In Slovakia



Lawrence Millman

Plectania melastoma.

During a recent mycological trip to Slovakia, the southern part of the former Czechoslovakia, I didn't hear any of the dour-faced binomial bashing that I so often hear in my own country. Instead, I heard remarks like the following:

"We need to be drinking when we're identifying fungi. Otherwise, how could we come up with any new species?"

The speaker of these words was Ivona Kautmanova, an expert mycologist based in Bratislava, the country's capital. We were drinking apricot schnapps and looking at what turned out to be *Daedaleopsis tricolor*. It wasn't the schnapps that gave us this name, however. *Daedaleopsis tricolor* is a European species that differs from *D. confragosa* in being more lamellate

and having a pileus that alternates bands of color, with one of those colors often a deep red.

During the day, we'd been looking for another lamellate polypore, *Lenzites warnieri*. This species fruits in the fall, but doesn't sporulate until the spring. In Slovakia, it has been found only once, on a willow tree growing on the Danube floodplain. On that floodplain, I'd examined every willow in sight, occasionally sinking several inches into riparian muck, but no *Lenzites*.

Lenzites warnieri is on the Red List of Slovakian fungi, and while Ivona and I didn't find it, we did find another Red Listed species, *Myriostoma coliforme*. This odd earthstar has pore mouths all over its exoperidium... hence its species name (*myriostoma* means "many mouths"). There were only a few

localities in the country where it had been documented.

A word about the Red Listing of fungi: although a project is in the works to get threatened fungi Red Listed globally, rare or uncommon fungi are now only protected by country. For example, 35% of all fungi have been placed on Germany's Red List, and several hundred species have been similarly designated in Slovakia. In the USA, however, only two lichens and one fungal species have been Red Listed. Call it zoocentricism, call it mycophobia, or call it the American Way. Perhaps call it a melange of all three...

This was early April, a period when unusual ascus fruit in Slovakia, so the next day I went to a piney sand plain northeast of Bratislava with Ivona, her husband Vaclav, and an ascomycete specialist named Milan. Milan had found several species at this site that hadn't been found elsewhere in Slovakia.

Almost as soon as we got out of the car, I noticed that lots of trees had been recently cut. Ivona told me that such cutting was illegal. When I asked her

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why the forestry people didn't punish the felons, she told me that the forestry people were the felons.

"Maybe all this cutting will aid biodiversity," I said, trying to look on the bright side. After all, there are more species of fungi in a disturbed forest than in a primary forest.

"Ah, biodiversity," Milan remarked. "You Americans love it so much that you would even bring Ebola into your country just to improve the biodiversity."

This jocular observation raised an as-yet unanswered question about the Red Listing of fungi: if a species is at once uncommon and a serious pathogen, should it be Red Listed? Or might we assume that an uncommon species doesn't do much damage precisely because it's uncommon?

Soon I began finding *Discinas* everywhere. Maybe they were *Discina perlata*, but maybe they were not—European species are not always the same as their North American lookalikes, and vice-versa. I did collect a few of those *Discinas* and later I put them under the microscope, but they turned out to be too immature to have spores.

Vaclav was an entomologist, and like quite a few entomologists of my acquaintance, he had exceptionally sharp eyes. He pointed to something that I didn't see. He pointed again, and I didn't see it again. At last he touched the specimen he was pointing at, and I saw a fruiting

body of *Sclerotinia* (= *Dumontinia*) *tuberosa*. The common name of this discomycete, "anemone cup," indicates that it resembles an anemone arising from a black sclerotium. Specimens typically have a thin meandering stipe that's well-nigh invisible... except to the harrowed sclerotia and individuals like Vaclav. I've found this species on anemones in the wild, but never on anemones in gardens.

We didn't find any fleshy fungi, but my companions did tell me about one, *Tylopilus felleus* (aka, the "bitter bolete"), that made an excellent libation when dried and put into vodka for several weeks. They said that the vodka becomes slightly, but not unpleasantly bitter. I made a point to make this drink later in the year, when *T. felleus* fruits with reckless abandon in my neck of the woods.

For years, I'd been looking for the discomycete *Plectania melastoma*. Looked in North America, in Europe, in Iceland, but I'd never found it. We were studying the piney debris at the edge of the forest when I suddenly shouted: "Holy shit!" For directly in front of me was a large cluster of *P. melastoma*. The species is unmistakable—it has a blackish-brown cup encrusted with orangish-red granules and a slightly toothed margin.

Here I should add that *P. melastoma* is another species on the Slovakian fungal Red List, and that this particular

locale—according to Milan—was the only one in the country where it had been documented. In being Red Listed, it can't be collected without a permit.

"What would happen to someone who collected it without a permit?" I asked Ivona.

"They would be fined 100 euros," she said. Then she asked me about the penalty for collecting Red Listed fungi in my country.

There would be no penalty, I told her, because there's no Red Listing ... yet. I added that if, on the other hand, a person was caught with a collection basket full of spotted owls, he/she would be penalized, perhaps severely.

Toward the end of the day, a man whose rigging was a bit disheveled joined us. He turned out to be a local farmer. When he learned that we were mycologists, he removed a specimen from his pocket and showed it to us. "Could you look at this *huba* [mushroom]?" he said. "I found it recently, and I think it's *Coltricia perennis*."

We looked at the specimen. It was indeed a *Coltricia perennis*.

That evening we celebrated a successful foray with the usual schnapps as well as some Slivovitz and Fernet Branca. Truth to tell, I did not come up with a new name for anything we had collected. Rather, I raised my glass and toasted Slovakia, its spring ascos, and its mycologically-aware farmers. †



Myriostoma coliforme.



Daedaleopsis tricolor.