

## A Walk with Michael Wojtech through Drumlin Farm

By Anna M. and Frank Buxton

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An important identifying feature for many mushrooms is the tree under which they are growing. While our fathers, recruited in the Canadian Army rapidly became experts on tree identification that may have been, because of military purposes, somewhat simplified. According to the Canadian army, circa 1940, there were only three trees: Christmas trees, Maples and Poplar trees (no that is not a typo). While this may have been sufficient to identify military objectives a more fine-grained approach may be required for accurate mycological identification.

So if we can just persuade mushrooms to limit their fruiting to months when the trees are in leaf, and only around the shorter trees so we can actually see the leaves, flowers, and twigs, we should be all set. However, can we really ignore those pesky ones that grow on, or around dead trees? Although, surprisingly, this may not have been the primary motivation for Michael Wojtech to study tree bark, we found that looking at bark guided by Michael, who has spent a good deal of his time mastering the art of describing, and developing the vocabulary for bark as a guide for tree identification, can be an eye opening and useful skill.

Bark has a simple function; it forms a relatively inert protective layer around the growing cells of the tree. Unfortunately as the outer layers of bark are dead and the inner tree want to grow by expanding, there comes a point where the bark has to give. So bark tells a simple story: though smooth in the upper branches where its layer formation keeps up with the synthesis of new wood, in the lower trunk the bark splits. And that is where the fun starts, depending on the species you can get ridges sometimes broken horizontally into blocks, or intersecting furrows, or scales, or rings. Moreover the pattern in the older, (lower down the tree), bark differs from tree to tree and has inspired this naturalist to build a key for tree identification. Michael encourages one to touch the bark, look for the pattern in the ridges and try to identify the tree.

For example, the Northern Red Oak displays a bark with ridges broken horizontally into blocks, the White Ash has ridges with intersecting furrows in the shape of a diamond, the Red Pine has a reddish bark with shallow ridges, the American Elm has a corky-like bark with intersecting furrows. In the Sugar Maple, the bark's surface is crackled and once a plate section develops, the plate breaks away. In all trees we were able to identify horizontal black lines, named lenticels, which provide passage of light and air.

Next time you are in the forest gazing at the ground looking for mushrooms, you may be able to avoid lifting your gaze much above the horizontal to identify the tree. Look at its bark and let Michael Wojtech's book, *Bark: A Field Guide to Trees of the Northeast*, identify the host for that potentially delectable Bolete, or on those days when the mushrooms are just hiding, the sheer complexity of bark may be yet another reason to hang out and enjoy the woods.