

NATURALLY: Thankful for our places of wonder

- By RYAN REED Special to the Gazette
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Turkey Tail mushrooms are a type of polypore mushroom, which means they release spores through small pores on their underside rather than gills.

Submitted photo

Roughly 17 million acres of Pennsylvania are covered by forests — about one-third of which are publicly accessible. We should all be thankful for these facts for many reasons: clean air and water, wildlife habitat, recreational opportunities, and so much more.

One reason to be thankful for forests, which I don't often encounter in things I read, is less quantifiable and admittedly abstract — but I'd bet that many readers feel the same. I think I speak for many of us when I say I'm thankful for our forests for the sense of wonder they inspire.

When I occupy our built environments, I rarely get that same feeling. There's no wonder in observing old gum spots on the sidewalk or the familiar sights of strip malls and subdivisions. When I look around those places, I know exactly what I'm getting, and my mind stops to ponder very little. It's quite the opposite in the forest.

In the woods, I see a tree cavity and wonder what's in there — or perhaps a “new” species I haven't yet observed. A fallen oak log inspires more pondering. When did it fall, and why? How old this behemoth must be! How many squirrels and birds nested in it, and how many deer did it feed? If the tree could talk, what stories could it tell?

Once the questions start, it's hard to stop them. In the forest, my mind regains a spirit of innocence not unlike that which I see in my young daughters. In short, these things are just plain fun



“What’s that?”

“It’s a shelf fungus.”

“What’s this?”

“That one is a turkey tail.”

“Why did that tree grow like that?”

“Probably because it got more sun on that side.”

“Daddy, how long do you think this stump will stay here? Do you think other people have sat here? Maybe animals sit here too! Oooh, look! There’s a tiny hole in the ground — do you think a chipmunk lives there? Does it have a family too?”

Many answers I know, and some make me wonder. Some I will never know — and there’s beauty in that, too. What a pleasure it is to experience these wanderings together that produce so much wonder.

This Thanksgiving, let us all reflect on — and give thanks for — those priceless moments of wonder in Penn’s Woods.

Ryan Reed is a natural resource program specialist with the Pennsylvania Department of Conservation and Natural Resources. The “Naturally” column appears monthly in partnership with Friends of White’s Woods to showcase the area’s natural wonders.