Although it may seem gruesome to us, the fact that the nematode is only paralyzed — rather than being killed outright — before the oyster mushroom begins to feed on it is actually a very subtle feature. If it were dead, the nematode would be quickly attacked and at least partly consumed by bacteria before the mushroom threads could make physical contact with the victim. By keeping the nematode immobile but alive the oyster mushroom can avoid the bacteria problem and keep all the nematode's precious nitrogen for itself.

We confessed at the start of this article to a naive belief in the essential vegetarian simplicity of mushrooms. For years in fact, we have enjoyed delicious snacks of fried-up oyster mushrooms without suspecting that what we were doing to them they had already done to tiny animals inside old tree trunks. The amazing discovery that the oyster mushroom and its relatives are "meat-eaters" brings up once again the thought expressed first and best by Shakespeare — "There are more things on heaven and earth than are dreamed of in your philosophy" .... Of course, for any nematodes reading this, the message is somewhat less elegant — "If you don't want to be paralyzed and devoured alive, beware of the fungi among ye!"

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THE CORACLE – GREENEST BOAT AFLOAT?

Chris Riddle

As wilderness canoeists most of us like to think of ourselves as environmentally responsible. Sometimes this is hard as we survey the array of fibreglass, kevlar, and other man-made fibres that go into so much of our canoes and gear.

This, and an interest in the history of exploration in Canada's North, may explain the fascination I have for all-natural, environment-friendly boats of one form or another. From birchbark canoe, to sealskin kayak, to dugout canoe, Canada has a rich tradition of such craft.

On a recent visit to England I was fortunate to meet Peter Faulkner, who continues the tradition of another all-natural boat: the celtic coracle. Given Canada's heritage, I question Peter's claim to build "the greenest boats afloat" but I will grant that they are 100% natural.

The coracle is constructed of willow canes woven on a hazelwood frame over which is stretched a hide skin to waterproof and tension the whole. A plank seat adds rigidity to the gunwales and a woven willow mat insulates the paddler from the water.

The craft has one element that should make it attractive to hardy three- and four-season WCA members: it is fur-lined! However, its lack of tracking ability may be of concern; from pictures of the coracle in action I would guess that its behavior in rapids resembles the way ducks bob along through class I and II water without concern twirling slowly round and round!

Peter has paddled over 600 km in his first coracle, which he built on the banks of the river Teme on the welsh borders.

As Peter says: "The coracle is about alternatives. The craft may seem simple but its creation encompasses many processes and skills harvesting and management of a withy (willow) bed; coppicing hazel; selecting, cleaning and curing hide; plaiting a 45 cm horsehair cord; and the critical operation of sewing the hide to the frame.

"The true beauty of these craft is not only to be found in their actual visual components, but in the very system which underlies their creation the harmonious partnership between one's creative skills and the natural materials of which the coracle is made."

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