

Watch your pets when mushrooms are present

By Michael Maciarello
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If your dog is chasing imaginary rabbits, or barking at cats that just aren't there, you may have to look no farther than your own backyard to find the reason.

In late June, I received three calls from people stating that their dogs had been eating mushrooms in their yards and were dizzy, disoriented or generally acting strangely afterwards. The descriptions of the mushrooms were all very similar, but no one was able to provide a sample for identification, claiming that either the dogs had eaten them all, or that they simply "disappeared."

Finally, a resident in Lewes called to inquire about his canine fungiphile, claiming to have hundreds of mushrooms in his backyard. I asked that he collect several for identification, but as the resident walked to his backyard, he told me that the mushrooms had disappeared. "That's funny, there were hundreds here this morning," he stated.

I got the address of the caller and the following Sunday morning I went to Lewes to run a 5K race. I took the opportunity to attempt to collect the mushroom. As I walked into the backyard, there were literally hundreds of the mushrooms in question, which I recognized as *Psathyrella foenicisii*, a small, rather nondescript mushroom that is common to lawns and grassy areas. The

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scenario began to make sense. This small, delicate mushroom grows quickly in the cool pre-dawn hours and usually withers away by midday, but I was unaware of any canine attractant or chemical properties that might cause disorientation or strange behavior. I photographed the mushroom and collected several samples to later verify my field identification.

After keying the mushroom and consulting the literature, I found that this was, in fact, *Psathyrella foenicisii*, sometimes referred to by the common name "lawn mowers mushroom."

This mushroom has a small but measurable amount of psilocybin, a potent hallucinogen, most commonly associated with the psilocybin mushrooms, *Psilocybe cubensis* and related species, found in the Southern U.S. and Mexico. Psilocybin mushrooms, when ingested, produce psychedelic, LSD-like effects, are reputed to be part of religious ceremonies among some indigenous people of Mexico, and were popular with a segment of the sixties counter-culture.

There is no report of a canine attractant in this mushroom and the odor is a nondescript fungal odor common to many other mushrooms. Fortunately, none of the animals suffered a fatal reaction to the inges-



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The Lawn Mowers Mushroom (*Psathyrella foenicisii*) is a common mushroom in grassy areas and contains a potent hallucinogen.

tion of this particular mushroom, but the predisposition among some dogs to eat foreign objects, especially mushrooms, is an especially dangerous one. Controlling the growth of mushrooms in the yard is not a practical undertaking. So I suggest checking the dog's area and keeping an eye on your dog if mushrooms are present.

Editor's note: Michael Maciarello is a faculty member in the Department of Agriculture and Natural Resources at Delaware State University.