

## **Red-banded Polypore by Rebecca Lexa**

Most mushrooms come and go within a few days, their network of root-like hyphae tucked away safely in the ground or decaying wood for the rest of the year. But a few fungi keep their reproductive structures out in the open for years at a time. If you look up the trunk of a decaying tree, you just might see one of these “conks” for yourself!

Look for a round, dish-like structure sticking out of the side of the tree. The underside will be white or cream, while the upper layer is colored with semicircular rings of reddish brown. The conk starts out as a small white blob on the tree, but over the years it can reach a foot or more in diameter. It only actively produces spores for a short time each year, and grows a new layer of pores on its underside to release them each time.

Red-banded polypores and other shelf fungi play an important role in their forest ecosystems. They are detritivores, meaning that they feed on decaying matter, specifically dead wood. They help to break down dead trees, and release their nutrients into the soil where plants and other living beings can access them. They only consume the cellulose in the wood, leaving lignin behind; this restructuring makes the tree a better place for woodpeckers and other animals to carve out a home. While red-banded polypores are more frequently found on dead trees, they can grow on live ones that have been damaged, and most of the time this only causes cosmetic damage, rather than affecting the tree’s health.