# Alien Eggs??

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Recently, several people have brought to me some seemingly strange objects they have found that seem to have fallen from trees. Most are round, about 1 inch or so in diameter, and are mottled with tan and red colors. They seem to have a very thin but tough shell and when cut open are filled with an almost blood red liquid and a dense pulp. One person described them as ‘Halloween eyeballs’, another as ‘Alien eggs’. They are appearing on the ground now beneath large trees, particularly oaks and have piqued the curiosity of many. I’ve found them along the shores of the French River.

These are actually the reproductive structures of tiny parasitic wasps called Cynipids and are known as galls. There are about 1,500 species of tiny insects, mostly parasitic wasps, that reproduce using a unique bit of genetic engineering on a host plant. The ones being found now, sometimes called oak apple gall, are from a tiny species of Cynipid wasp about an eighth of an inch long that lays eggs into the underside of an oak leaf. Substances on the egg actually cause changes in the genetic control of leaf cells causing a tumor like growth that becomes the gall. If you carefully cut open the gall, you’ll find a tiny whitish wasp larva inside a dense center. The gall takes nutrients from the leaf and provides nutrition for the larva. At some point the gall falls from the leaf and completes development in the leaf litter. Many of the galls overwinter with the larva completing development and hatching in the springtime as a minute parasitic wasp ready to complete the life cycle again. Some galls can be seen in the winter time as bulges in the stems of dead goldenrod stalks. This one is caused by the larva of a tiny moth.

Galls are actually fairly common if you take the time and patience to look for them. Kayaking or walking along the river is a good opportunity to look because of the variety of nearby and overhanging vegetation. Cancer researchers study many of the galls genetic qualities since their activity is similar to the development of tumors in humans. Nature continuously surprises us.