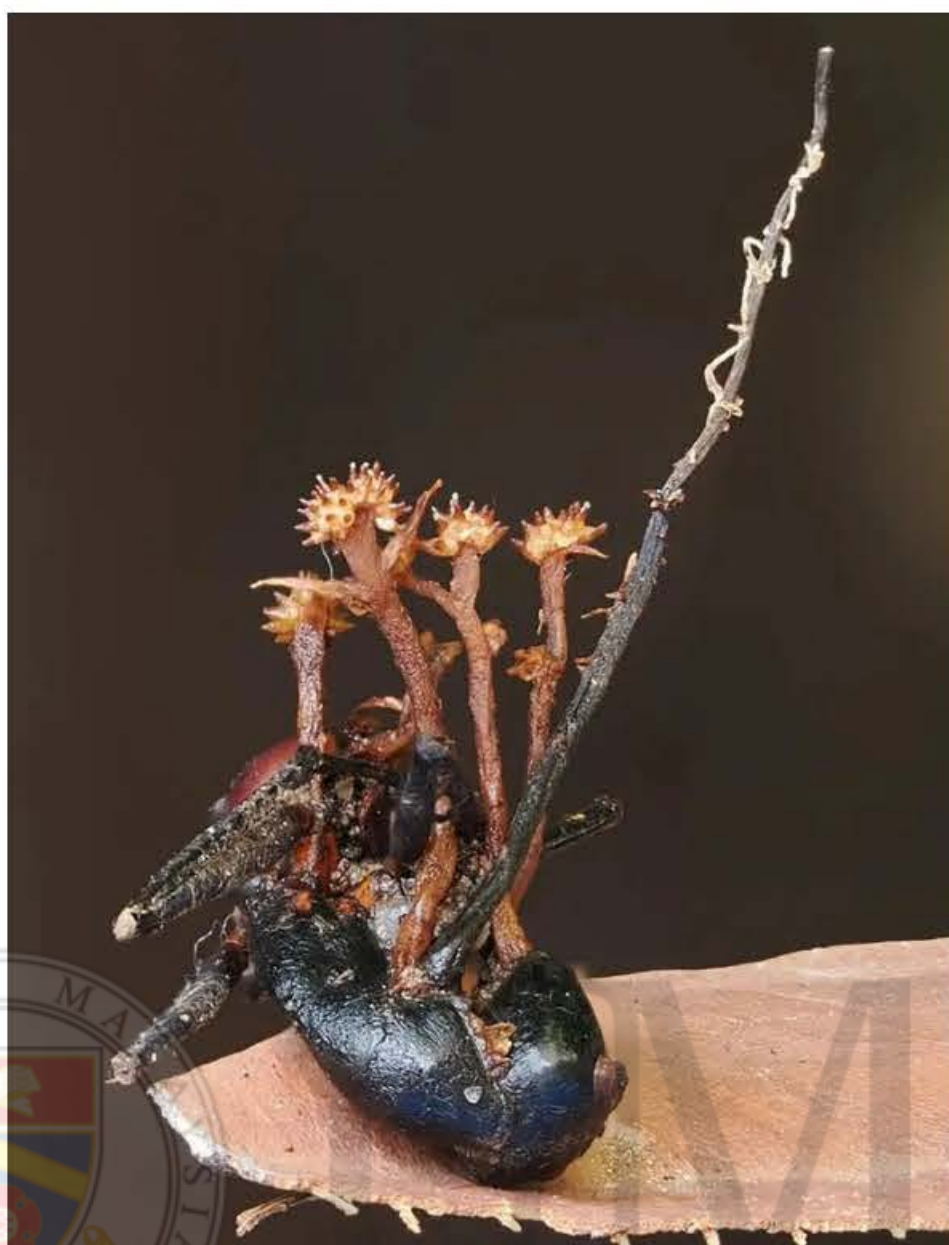


Scientists discover 'hyperparasite' in Borneo jungle

By **Afp** June 19, 2026 @ 3:03pm



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— AFP

KUALA LUMPUR: Malaysian scientists have discovered a new species of parasitic fungus in Borneo that preys on the "zombie fungus" known to kill insects.

The new species was collected during field trips conducted by the Universiti Malaysia Sabah Institute for Tropical Biology and Conservation.

It was dubbed a "hyperparasite" because it "effectively parasitises the primary pathogen," said the institute's deputy director Jaya Seelan Sathiya Seelan.

"The fungus belongs to the genus *Pleurocordyceps* and acts as a specialised hyperparasite," Seelan said.

The new species targets ants already infected by *Ophiocordyceps*, or "zombie fungus", which manipulates the infected insect's nervous system and makes it behave erratically before killing it and bursting from its carcass.

"Rather than manipulating the insect's nervous system itself, *Pleurocordyceps* infiltrates and feeds directly on the thriving *Ophiocordyceps* tissue inside the host," Seelan said.

Named after its unique, distinctly horn-shaped structure, *Pleurocordyceps cornusynnemata* was discovered after scientists studied a dead ant collected from the Danum Valley, a remote area in southern Sabah.

The discovery was also published in *Phytotaxa*, the leading journal in taxonomic botany, in April.

It is not the first hyperparasite of its kind, but "it is the world's first known member of its genus to feature this highly distinct horn-shaped structure", Seelan said.

During the field trips, scientists also discovered a new species of spider-killing fungus, which spreads spores through the arachnid before killing it.

"These newly documented fungi hold immense potential... both as sources for developing next-generation antimicrobial drugs and as highly effective biocontrol agents against agricultural pests," Seelan said.