

Nature Notes 12: Foraging for Fungi on Upgate Common

Last year I wrote about some of some of the toxic fungi which can be found on Upgate Common. Please do not think that all fungal fruiting bodies are as poisonous as **death cap** or **destroying angel**. On the contrary, the fruiting bodies of a large proportion of species are not only edible but form the basis of some delicious gourmet dishes. On mainland Europe, where there are greater areas of woodland, there is a much stronger tradition of harvesting fungi (including the much-prized truffles) than there is in this country.

When some leading experts in identifying fungi visited Upgate Common in mid-August their main objective was not gastronomic, rather it was to see how many different species they could find. Mid-August is a less productive time for spotting fungi than mid-autumn but they still found over eighty species in one day, many within 200m of entering the common.



Birch bracket fungus
(*cabinet of curiosities*)

Most were the traditional “toadstool” shape with a stalk and cap. Some of these had spore-bearing gills on the underside of the cap, as the common field mushroom does but others had a more solid-looking underside permeated with hundreds of little pores from which the spores fall to be dispersed by the wind to new substrates such as the *Boletus* species. Many bracket fungi have such pores, e.g. the **birch bracket fungus**, often seen growing out of the trunk of dead or dying birch trees. Others were encrusting species growing on the moist undersurface of fallen branches while others, the rusts and smuts, are parasitic on leaves.

Five of the species they found *had never previously been recorded in Norfolk*. The scientific name of the rarest: ***Coprinopsis foetidilla***, gives away where it is found, in this case on an ageing pat of horse dung. This species of fungus has only ever been *found in seven other places in the whole of the United Kingdom*. Similarly, ***Entoloma casabas***, another first for Norfolk, has only been recorded in 15 other sites in the UK. I think we can safely say that Swannington has earned a creditable place on a map of fungal foraging sites in Great Britain.



Chicken of the woods
(*viriniawildflowers.org*)

One of the things that I find fascinating about fungi is their English names. Amongst the species collected were: **chicken of the woods** (not located by its clucking!!); **deceiver** (possibly named for tricking people into thinking it is harmful when actually it is perfectly edible); **sweet poison pie** (sounds like another deceiver to me);



Ugly milkcap (*Wikimedia.commons*)

blusher (may be so named because it was embarrassed by referring to a neighbouring species by its vividly descriptive name of **ugly milk cap**).

Not all of the 12,000 species of fungi in the world reproduce by producing fruiting bodies. Many species that live within the soil produce spores asexually and may use different ways of dispersing them. Many tens of thousands of minute animals live in each square metre of soil. When I was working on decomposition processes and nutrient cycling in the foothills of the Rocky Mountains in Canada I found that 127 species of fungi “hitch-hiked” lifts on tiny soil animals, just as burrs and goose grass seeds can be dispersed in our pet’s fur.

In this way, even very small animals can make a significant contribution to the global nutrient cycles that drive the productivity of higher plants on which we all rely for our food.



Onchyurus subtenuis
(1mm long) showing very fine setae between which fungal spores are carried (*oocities.org*)