

FUNGI FORAY – SEPTEMBER 2004



A rainy September afternoon, I was taken foraging for wild mushrooms by John Wright. He is an expert (www.wildmushrooms.info) and had little difficulty identifying almost all we found. We found a lot. What surprised me most was that there were so many different fungal varieties in a relatively small area. We started at the Kingcombe Centre (www.kingcombe-centre.demon.co.uk), near Toller Porcorum in Dorset. They offer courses, walks, nature studies and even fungal forays in a scenic setting.

Two of my sons came too. They were excellent fungus spotters. John says it's because of their keen eye sight and because they are closer to the ground. But I think that their enthusiasm had something to do with it too. It was very exciting, particularly when we discovered a new type. The first one we came across, heavily camouflaged in the bank, was an Earthball, apparently a distant relative of the Puffball. Like most of the ones we found it was inedible. The next was called 'Beefsteak', unfortunately not because it tasted like beef steak but because it has a similar texture. It is edible but not very tasty. And it has a sap like a watery, bloody latex.

Small spindly mushrooms that were growing on rotting wood were identified as *Mycena haematopus*. John knew both the common names and the Latin ones. But I have to admit that after a short time I stopped trying to get the Latin names because they were so long and complicated, if rather lyrical.

My elder son, Connor asked why plants (and animals) all have Latin names. This was something else that John could tell us. A Swedish chap named Linnaeus was the founder of taxonomy and started the practice of having one name for each species or plant variety. Previously there had been lots of names, which made it difficult to establish that people were talking about the same thing.

We got to an Alder swamp but didn't find the mushroom that apparently only grows there. But we did find a very common fungus called Blushing Bracket, so named because it goes pink where it has been bruised.



Blackening *Russula* was another find. The first one we saw was very black but John told us that they start completely white. He also said they were worth keeping because when they are very rotten other toadstools grow on them piggy back. My youngest son, Monty, then found a purplish mushroom with white spots. This was another *Russula* and it transpired that the white spots were actually made by slugs.

The most exciting mushrooms, from a culinary perspective, that we collected were Chanterelle. When we fried them in butter for supper, I felt very disappointed we didn't find any more than a small handful. They were absolutely delicious. I hope I will be able to identify them again but I'm not completely certain because many of the mushrooms we found looked very similar to each other but turned out not even to be distantly related. Poison Pie for example looked very similar to Common Yellow *Russula* until you examined them close up and could see the colour difference, particularly of the gills.

John's interest in mushrooms was spawned from his courting days. His girlfriend, who is now his wife, used to meet him in the New Forest. Seeing the multitude of fungal species got him interested and he started researching to find out more about them. But in the world of mushroom experts, John says "I am considered to be a rank amateur because I'm a generalist" he told me. Many fellow experts specialise in only one mushroom species making me suspect that they would have a lot in common with train spotters and twitchers!

We did find some poisonous mushroom varieties although nothing very potent like the Death Cap. A couple though like the *Lactarius pyrogalus* and the Ugly Milk Cap had very hot milk, which would set your mouth on fire if you ate them. They may have been poisonous but you wouldn't be able to eat enough of them to find out.

Our rarest find was a wax cap. We found lots of them in the field but restrained from picking any under John's instruction. They had very green stems and looked interesting. The reason they are rare though is because they need untouched pasture land to grow and there isn't much of that left.

Another fungus we had to restrain ourselves from picking or as my sons wanted to do, kicking were the two large puffballs we found at the final gate. When they are 'ripe' kicking them will spread the spores but we were too early for that and therefore would have just destroyed them and their offspring.

Not much to eat at the end of our expedition but a fungal foray with a very diverse harvest. And in my case a new enthusiasm for Chanterelles.



Monty Bryant, John Wright & Connor Bryant