



Foraging for fungi

Mushrooms and toadstools have always fascinated me and, as an enthusiastic amateur, I record the fungi on Chailey Commons for the Sussex Biodiversity Record Centre. Occasionally I send specimens to Kew for identification and once discovered that a particular species had only recently arrived in southern England and was a new record for the county.

In the past fungi were thought of as evil and were not studied and as thoroughly as conventional plants. Mycologists are still catching up but modern classification systems have put fungi in a kingdom of their own. The UK is unquestionably the best country in the world for recording species. For example, at Oxshot Heath near London, an area of 380 hectares, more species have been recorded than in the whole of China.

It is said that if it were not for fungi the world would be a rubbish dump. Fungi not only recycle organic material, such as dead wood and forest litter; they also supply the roots of green plants with minerals in exchange for carbohydrates produced by the plants. A familiar example of this symbiotic association is that of the Fly Agaric – the poisonous, white-spotted red toadstool that is often illustrated in children's books – with the roots of birch trees. Rather like the network of cables and pipes underlying our cities, forest soil is crowded with a network of fungal mycelia working to break down dead and dying material and making minerals available to green plants.

The wonderful variety of fungi shapes and colours appear mostly in autumn. Some grow in fairy rings, others occur singly or in small groups, and some take the form of puffballs, fairy clubs, earth stars or penny buns. Some have pores instead of gills. Climate change may be having an influence with some fungi appearing earlier in spring or carrying on later into the autumn.

When leading a fungus foray, I am frequently asked, 'Is it edible?' Some species are delicious, but most are not good to eat and a few are deadly. The poisonous ones can look superficially like edible ones so unless you are absolutely certain of your identification it is best to leave it alone.

Rosalie Sinclair-Smith
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