FUNGUS FORAY IN SYDNEY WOOD WITH DR JOHN HEDGER

4th October 2011

Our first autumn walk took us to Sydney Wood where, armed with baskets and books, we set off to seek out and identify mushrooms. Luckily we had with us Dr John Hedger who generously shared his scientific knowledge and infectious enthusiasm for fungi.

He initially explained that fungi are not only associated with decay and recycling but that there are some varieties that have a symbiotic relationship with trees providing them with essential nutrients. The part we see is the fruiting body which is the tip of the iceberg and below the surface is the mycelium, a mass of thin threads which feed the fungus. In one gram of soil there can be up to 20 km of mycelium.

We did not have to venture far to find a great variety of specimens which were then duly identified. This was by no means a simple task. The characteristics to look out for are size, shape, texture, colour, constituency of the flesh, stipe ring present or absent, taste (not advised), smell, gills, habitat, and most importantly for conclusive identification, the spores.

Hymenochaete corrugata

We were impressed with the glue crust (*Hymenochaete corrugata*) which grows mainly on hazel and glues dead hazel branches to live trees to prevent them falling to the ground and being invaded by other fungi. Another fungus we found growing on rotting wood was *Mollisia cinerea* which was at first sight insignificant but seen through a hand lens was a carpet of beautifully formed grey cups.

The Hares Ears and Dead Molls Fingers lived up to their names and the three types of puffball that we saw in all stages of development included a puffing specimen at the touch of a finger.

Macrolepiota procera

We found a compost heap that hosted a number of parasols (*Macrolepiota procera*) and horse mushrooms (*Agaricus arvensis*) both of which were suggested as possible ingredients for a risotto, but we did not want to share them with the resident creepy crawlies. Also it was pointed out by a former victim of misidentity that Shaggy Parasols (*Macrolepiota rhacodes*) which are very similar to parasols can in some cause gastric upsets.

Although not strictly a fungus we were pleased see an unusual slime mould *Mucilago crustacea* which was clinging to grass near the ground. This started life as single amoeba like cells which grouped together, ingested bacteria and then crawled out of the soil onto the grass. It contains calcium oxylate which is poisonous to horses.

Mucilago crustacea

Using the specimens we had collected as examples John gave us a brief overview of Fungi classification into families .

Otidea onotica

There are about 20 families characterised mainly by their spores. For example the Russulas have warty spores, the Tricholomas have white spores, the Boletus have tubes instead of gills. There is so much to learn in order to be able to identify fungi but help is at hand in the form of a very good reference book that we had with us on the foray and can thoroughly recommend. “Collins Complete Guide to British Mushrooms and Toadstools by Paul Sterry and Barry Hughes”.

Thank you John for a most enjoyable, informative and inspirational foray.

Linda Koscia

All images by Roger Mason