

FUNGI WALK at HODGEMOOR WOOD, September 14th 2019

Penny Cullington

We were a group of 11 this morning, two of whom were new members. It was a stunning day: warm and brilliantly sunny, but boy was it dry underfoot! This, I think, is the third consecutive 'Indian summer' resulting in poor numbers of fungi in September though with a struggle we made it to 52 species today, but of those only 20 were gilled toadstool types. Last year we came here on Sept 15th and found 70 species – a fairly modest total for a site renowned for its fungi at what should be prime fruiting time. So today proved even more disappointing though at least we found a couple of things which have not been recorded here before – quite an achievement for a wood which has been well recorded over the last 20 years or more.



Above, *Fomes fomentarius* on a fallen Birch trunk. (PC)

One of these was a bracket I first learnt to recognise in Scotland 25 years ago where it abounds on Birch trees though at the time it was a rare find further south. *Fomes fomentarius* (Hoof Fungus / Tinder Bracket) has since then been gradually spreading its range south and we saw it in Ashridge for the first time last year. So when it turned up today I suspected it would be new to the site and our database confirms it as the second county record. (There are two earlier records but I choose to disregard them as probably incorrect: one was on Poplar – not at all likely for a fungus host specific to Birch, the other in 1990 – no host tree mentioned, so again probably not at all likely and in both cases not identified by a well reputed mycologist!)

As is often the case when conditions are dry we resorted to turning over logs and looking at fallen wood in the hope of finding something fruiting. Even so nothing of particular note was found though quite a few collections of *Scleroderma* (Earthballs) were found in soil mainly growing under Oak. To the less experienced these can be easily confused with *Lycoperdon* (Puffballs) which are, however, much softer with thin skins in comparison, also are white inside until mature whereas Earthballs are black inside from an early age. Determining Earthballs to species can often be a challenge and today at home I checked the size and ornamentation (outer hairy surface) of the spores of several collections, ending up with three different species. The least common of these was *Scleroderma bovista* (Potato Earthball) with 12 previous county records compared to 83 for *S. areolatum* and 103 for *S. verrucosum*. It may well not be that much rarer but is easy to mistake for one of the others or even for *S. citrinum* – the commonest of all the species but not seen by us today.



Above, *Scleroderma bovista* showing its fairly smooth outer surface, the black spore mass within and yellowing flesh below this when exposed to the air. (PC)

Below, rather desiccated specimens of *Mycena pelianthina*. (cvs)



handlens the edges are distinctly purple (not really black as its common name suggests) – a unique feature so useful to confirm identification. Like the others in the *M. pura* group it has a sharp smell which we describe of as radish. It's possibly as common as *M. pura* and *M. rosea* and grows in the same habitat: deciduous leaf litter, particularly Beech.

On the horse trail towards the end I noticed a small immature pale brown 'toadstool' which on collection reminded me of *Psilocybe semilanceata* (Magic Mushroom) owing to its acutely pointed cap. Not surprisingly everyone was instantly rather interested and wanting to know about this species which is listed as a Class A drug. The habitat was entirely wrong, however, this being a purely grassland species and our specimen was in soil at the path edge in woodland. Being immature the gills were not really visible but at home I extracted a bit of gill which revealed dark spores and cells on the edge which proved to be not a species of *Psilocybe* but of *Panaeolus* (Mottlegill). This was ***Panaeolus papilionaceus*** (Petticoat Mottlegill), so named for the frilly white edge often hanging down from its cap when mature, though in our undeveloped specimen this white edge (the veil) was still firmly attached and visible around the top of the stem to protect the undeveloped gills.



Above right, today's immature *Panaeolus papilionaceus* with its typical white frilly veil still in tact around the stem top and yet to decorate the cap edge (cvs). The insert to the right shows an example of more mature caps with their 'petticoats' adorning the cap edge and making this species instantly recognisable. (PC) Since this genus is often found on or near dung or manured soil, it is no surprise that it should turn up on this well used horse trail.

Of our meagre list of 'toadstool' types, few were worthy of mention or photos, but one was a species of *Mycena* (Bonnet) which often confuses people because it's atypical for the genus. ***Mycena pelianthina*** (Blackedge Bonnet) is a species closely related to *M. pura* and *M. rosea*, rather fleshy and larger than many other Bonnets. The cap colour is a rather nondescript dirty washed-out beige with a pinkish-lilac hint, but when turned over if you look carefully at the gills with a





To finish with, a species no-one has difficulty in identifying though surprisingly this particular specimen did not give away its presence to us by its usual method: smell! We stumbled upon it at the edge of the horse trail by chance. The flies were clearly still able to pick up its smell, however, and were buzzing round merrily.

Above a magnificent specimen of *Phallus impudicus*. (cvs)

Thanks, everyone, for your patience and valiant searching today: it was hard work and somewhat frustrating when we know that this particular site abounds with fungi given the right conditions at this time of year. Thanks, too, to Claudi for his identifications and photos.

Photographers: CVS = Claudi Soler; PC = Penny Cullington.