

FUNGI WALK at PITSTONE COMMON, ASHRIDGE on Sept 21st 2024

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Our group of 15 met up today in the Barracks Square car park on Monument Road instead of our usual parking spot owing to the closure of the Dockey Wood car park for felling operations. So rather than covering the planned Ivinghoe Common we ended up in Pitstone Common – still just in the Bucks part of the Ashridge Estate which is to the north of Monument Road and for which we appear to have only one previous set of records. This was no bad thing as we avoided any areas where felling would no doubt have disrupted our progress had we been further to the north of this large site. The morning was fine and warm though the area was generally very dry and pretty unproductive with many species represented by singletons which tended to be somewhat atypical, shrivelled and damaged or eaten, making identification quite a challenge at times and also limiting opportunities for photography. However, as nearly always happens, once attendees started ‘getting their eye in’ and searching carefully, we amassed a longer species list than last weekend though still pitifully short for late September.

At the start we handed out a few copies of our recently introduced list of the 40 commonest woodland species in Bucks, encouraging those attendees not that confident at recognising them for themselves to take home a few of today’s specimens to test out our new online key now available at <http://www.bucksfungusgroup.org.uk/beginners.html>. Today’s final list totalled just under 60 species, only a very few of which would be considered anything approaching the unusual, and in fact literally half of our ‘Common 40’ showed up though very few were suitably typical to use as guinea-pigs. Nevertheless it was gratifying both to the brave few who attempted the key later and to us who devised it that there were some success stories! Good images and descriptions of all of the ‘Common 40’ follow the key and it is hoped this will become a regular reference for the less experienced members.

This is an opportunity to feature a couple of pretty mundane things found today - species which could affectionately be described as ‘Bums on seats’, ie they regularly bump up the numbers on our lists though are not eye-catching and often given hardly a second glance. Both are very common members of the sizeable group of Ascomycetes (the spore-shooters) known as Pyrenomycetes, recognised by their hard black crusty general appearance.

Biscogniauxia nummularia is quite a mouthful of a name for a fairly insignificant species but its English name Beech Tarcrust describes it fine. It forms flat black irregular patches which tend not to coalesce and is only found on fallen Beech. However *Diatrype stigma* (Common Tarcrust) is equally common and forms smooth black large expanses on fallen branches and trunks of a range of smooth-barked deciduous trees. With a hand lens both species can be seen to be dotted with tiny holes – ostioles – through which their spores are shot out.

Below: *Biscogniauxia nummularia*; right: *Diatrype stigma* (SJE)





At one point during the morning the unpleasant smell of *Phallus impudicus* (Stinkhorn) was detected, and the culprit was soon located amongst the litter and vegetation, liberally covered in flies enjoying their tasty but smelly feast!

Left: *Phallus impudicus*, the spore-rich sticky olive green gleba (top section) having been devoured by flies. (JW)

We saw various examples of the genus *Mycena* (Bonnet) though as is often the way it was a case of taking most of them home to examine with a scope before naming. However, two species found on fallen wood were nameable from their distinct field characters. Just one

example of *Mycena crocata* (Saffrondrop Bonnet) turned up – no photo here but there are plenty of images showing its orange stem juice on our website, either in Members Finds via the Masterlist index



or our Document 7 in Foundations in Field Mycology at the link given previously. Several immature examples of *Mycena inclinata* (Clustered Bonnet) were identified from their distinctive mealy smell (though to me of lupins!). We have a photo taken this morning but I've also included a library photo to show it in more typical form. *M. crocata* is frequent on fallen Beech and *M. inclinata* of fallen branches or stumps of Oak.

Right: a mature clump of *Mycena inclinata* showing its tightly clustered habit and stem typically turning increasingly orange then brown in the lower half (PC). The inset is of today's immature examples recognised mainly by their smell though the clustered habit is clear but the stem colour is only just beginning to develop. (JW)



A genus which was relatively well represented today was *Russula* (Brittlegill). A large and showy genus of over 160 species, the members of which tend to fruit early in the season and many have been recorded here at Ashridge. As often happens when they first start to appear, they are

quickly nibbled by various animals and slugs, and this was certainly the case today. We were lucky to find one pristine example which was nameable in the field aided by the use of a crystal made of ferrous iron salts and rubbed on the stem. This can be a useful tool to separate several lookalike species. Most Brittlegill stems quickly turn a dirty rust colour where rubbed with this crystal, but a few react very differently and today's species - *Russula cyanoxantha* (Charcoal Burner) is unique in having very little reaction at all, then if anything turning slightly greyish green. Its greenish violet cap colours, sometimes likened to spilt petrol, also occur in several other common Brittlegills, so the FE test on the stem is very useful.



Left: *Russula cyanoxantha* with stem showing the slight reaction where rubbed with a crystal of iron salts. (EP)

We also found several examples of a bright red-capped *Russula* which we were able to name because of the trees present in the vicinity. This is an important mycorrhizal genus, growing with trees with which it shares a mutually beneficial relationship, attached to its roots. Recognising the tree where you find a *Russula* can be diagnostic. If there had been Pine present then this red species could well have been *R. emetica* (The Sickener); if there had been Beech present then it could well have been *R. nobilis* (Beechwood Sickener). However, with only Oak and Sweet Chestnut nearby this pointed to ***R. silvestris*** (Woodland Brittlegill). No photo from today but here is one I made earlier(!), included to illustrate the wide diversity of the genus.



Above: *Russula silvestris*, one of the many red-capped species. (PC)



Another mycorrhizal genus we came across today was *Cortinarius* (Webcap), with several specimens of a species belonging to section *Telamonia* turning up under the Sweet Chestnuts. This is a genus of over 600 species in the UK and one of the most challenging though the fairly recent Kibby & Tortelli monograph has helped to make it more approachable. I spent some time keying this collection out at home, the general characters together with spore size and shape, smell, and violet flesh in the stem apex when cut leading me to ***Cortinarius valgus*** (Bowed Webcap), one which I recall K & T identifying from Burnham Beeches when I was with them in 2022 and which they mention is probably not rare but just under-recorded. Note the telltale rusty spores which have adhered to and coloured the remnants of veil towards the top of the stem – a sure pointer in any LBJ (Little Brown Job) that it belongs to this genus.

Left: *Cortinarius valgus* found under Sweet Chestnut today. (EP)

Perhaps the nicest find of the morning was the tiny ***Lanzia echinophila*** (Hairy Nuts Disco) which grows almost exclusively on the fallen rotting husks of Sweet Chestnut. Our records show that Derek found this species whilst on a Herts group foray here in Ashridge back in 2011, but that would have been from the Herts section of the estate! Our only Bucks record dates from 2007 from N. Bucks on the greensands ridge. So congratulations to Joe for spotting it today – never easy with these tiny things when lurking in the litter where the light is often poor. The size of the fungus here can be judged by comparing the stemmed discs to the adjacent spikes of the husk.



Above: *Lanzia echinophila* on a Sweet Chestnut husk (JL)

To finish with, first a slime mould then a rust and a smut! The slime mould was found on a piece of woody debris and was taken home by Jackie who is making a study of such species. She identified it as *Stemonitis fusca*, probably the commonest of the genus which looks for all the world like miniscule pipe-cleaners! This species has a stalk (not called a stem in slime moulds!) which is roughly half the height of the whole fungus and is a rich fuscous brown colour when mature, though here it is still immature and at the pink slimy stage of development.

Right: *Stemonitis fusca* found today. (EP)



Two unusual species to finish with, found and identified by Sarah and Stephen both of whom are getting very proficient at finding and identifying fungi affecting plants, a group which many of us ignore. The first is *Cercospora depazeoides* which affects the leaves of Elder and was identified by Sarah and is our second county record. The second is *Sphacelotheca hydroperis* which affects the flowers of Water Pepper and was found and identified by Stephen and is new to the county.



Left: *Cercospora depazeoides* (SJE)

Right: *Sphacelotheca hydroperis* (SP)

Thanks to all attendees for making this such an enjoyable morning despite the fact that it was quite hard going. Thanks also to the photographers who made the most of our motley collection of species. For details of what we found see the separate complete species list.



Photographers

EP = Eleanor Page; JL = Justin Long; JW = Justin Warhurst; PC = Penny Cullington;
SJE = Sarah Ebdon; SP = Stephen Plummer

