

MUSHROOM NEWSLETTER

3 March 2009

It's that time of year when every true mushroom fanatic begins to fidget. Clive Houlder, who claims to be Britain's only year-round professional mushroom hunter, says that even he struggles to find much in March. This is frustrating to put it mildly, but the only option is to take a deep breath and wait for Easter's morels and St George's.



Spring is clearly here . . . but the first mushrooms are still nearly two months away

In the interim I have been keeping myself busy by completely revamping my website (www.fungiforays.co.uk) and mailing out brochures. The former now has monthly articles on wildlife and other seasonal wild foods (usually non-fungal). Having spent a small fortune on the new site, I would particularly welcome any feedback and constructive criticism.

Meanwhile, I continue to get a stream of queries and observations from newsletter subscribers and past forayers. For example Carl wrote with an implied query after finding a collection of scarlet elfcups in late February: "One book says they are edible

and the other says they attack blood cells if not cooked properly”, he says. It was clear from his tone he was toying with the idea of eating his find, but in the end wisely decided on caution. The fact that he even played with the idea of tucking in, however, was so unusual that it set me thinking.



The scarlet elfcup provides a welcome dash of colour when there are few other mushrooms around

Virtually every British fungi-phile is ultra-wary when it comes to eating any new species – even when their own identification has been confirmed by a mycologist. On the Continent, however, a significant minority takes a more adventurous approach and will experiment with strange species in a way that seems positively cavalier to we Brits. As a result a couple of dozen people die there each season, while last year’s Isle of Wight death cap incident is probably the only British ‘gastronomic’ fatality in over a century.

Now when it comes to these elfcups, I personally doubt they are dangerous (very few species are seriously poisonous and those that are tend to be heavily flagged). This certainly isn’t a recommendation, however, and I prefer never to take even the slightest risk. This is based on personal experience: the horrible feeling of uncertainty after eating an unknown is extremely unpleasant and the suspense lasts almost a fortnight.

For confirmed thrill-seekers still determined to experiment, however, I would certainly cook them well and then consume them in small quantities. Actually I would advise this with any new mushroom – only yesterday I talked to a woman who had had a bad experience with a cultivated field blewit from Tesco’s. I think overall, however, that anyone who nibbles on a elfcup is likely to be gravely disappointed in every field. I cannot find any reference to them as ‘delicious’ or even ‘edible’. In

other words, these are likely to be yet another one of the 10,000-odd British mushrooms that are neither edible nor poisonous, just chewy, tasteless and indigestible.



Many mushrooms – such as larch boletes, honey fungus and beefsteak are not worth bothering with . . .

On this note – and looking forward to the season ahead – I would also urge restraint on any mushroom hunter. Try everything edible at least once by all means, but unless you are trying to show off your knowledge/bravado to friends, you should quickly focus on the dozen or so species that really ‘work’ for you. A lot of so-called ‘edibles’ are pretty indifferent in my view. Thus I personally ignore brown birch-; larch- and pine boletes; won’t touch puffballs and most waxcaps and consider macrosporus too indifferent to bother with. I also avoid honey fungus because I don’t rate it highly and dislike the idea of anything which needs to be boiled before cooking. Finally, I genuinely shudder at the idea of beefsteak which in my view is positively disgusting.



. . . Far better to concentrate on St George's, chanterelles, ink caps, cauliflower and porcini

In short, I think life is too short to cook with unpleasant ingredients – instead one should use any time one has for foraging to look for the best. These include morels, St George's, chicken of the woods, chanterelles, parasols, shaggy ink caps, hen-of-the-woods, porcini, bay- and orange birch boletes, cauliflower, hedgehogs, winter chanterelles and both types of deceivers and blewits. That said, in a really bad year I would switch the goalposts slightly, however, to include ‘halfway houses’ like field mushrooms, meadow waxcaps and yellow swamp russulas.



Field mushrooms, meadow waxcaps and yellow russulas are better than nothing

Now before everyone rushes to dispute these lists, I would stress they are very much a personal opinion. I know of people who positively relish blushers, yellow stainers and giant polypores – none of which I would touch. Indeed, Antonio Carluccio put beefsteak and giant puffballs in his ‘top five’ autumn species. To my mind this rather

confirms my suspicion that when he pontificates on the qualities of various fungi in his books and lectures, he is actually relying on the general ignorance and fears of the British public.

Anyway, that's enough for now. Roll on the Easter harvest and if you want a brochure and booking slip for this year, but haven't received it by the end of the week, drop me a line with your address.

Daniel Butler

www.fungiforays.co.uk

01597 811168 / 0779 429 4221

P.S. I loathe junk e-mails and would be horrified to think I might be clogging up your systems unnecessarily, so if at any time you want your name taken off, just let me know with a brief - preferably polite - indication that you want to be removed.