

# MUSHROOM NEWSLETTER

**10 October 2017**

As we reach the peak of the autumn season, it is time to address the usual autumnal claims that our woodland fungi are under assault from commercial mushroom pickers. Basically it simply isn't happening, but as a negative, this is, of course, almost impossible to prove. (Apparently Bertrand Russell and Ludwig Wittgenstein once spent half an hour crawling around a Trinity College study in a failed attempt to prove no rhinos were present.)



*Where are the commercial gangs?*

For those that are convinced they've witnessed gangs at work, I have an explanation, but first let's look at the facts:

- 1) London wholesalers – the ones in the same markets that supply the catering trade with vegetables and meat – currently sell various fungi at £20 - £50 per kg. Because these are highly perishable, this means they buy in at £6 - £20 per kg
- 2) Before these mushrooms ever get to market, they have to be graded (probably about 50% wastage), packaged professionally, have the appropriate paperwork prepared and then be transported to the city-based wholesalers.



*This morning haul looks wonderful to a forager, but has very limited appeal to most restaurants*

3) So to earn £100 from a wholesaler, the 'gang' will need at least 20kg of choice edible species (forget lesser fry such as oysters, honey fungus and birch boletes)



*Restaurants and wholesalers want choice graded species such as saffron milk caps, ceps and girolles*

- 4) A round trip to London from, say, the New Forest is about 200 miles (and that's after all the driving around the Forest gathering the mushrooms). The van's fuel/depreciation and the driver are going to cost nearly £200.
- 5) So, sticking to this theoretical example, the commercial gang needs to collect at least 40 – 50kg of choice species just to pay for the transport.
- 6) Ah, but how long will it take to collect and grade 50kg? Let's say 40 man hours at minimum wages – might be less, but more often it will be more. We need to cover that – so that's another 60kg of choice wild mushrooms to cover the wages of the gang.
- 7) So by now we need to start by picking around 110 kg of choice wild mushrooms to make the exercise worthwhile. Oops! That's another 40 hours of collecting and grading etc. Well, in the end we're probably talking about the gang needing about 200kg of four or five choice species to make everything break even.

I don't see how this can work. And I have yet to meet anyone else who can see how it can work.



*Three kilos of porcini would make any forager happy – but they probably aren't worth selling*

Meanwhile, there are other factors to be considered.

- 1) We live in a world of full food traceability: field to plate. Restaurants go bankrupt at the first hint of an outbreak of food poisoning. They are only going to buy from a very trusted supplier. In rare cases there might be a personal link with a trusted local, but it won't be a guy with grubby overalls and a thick Polish accent who knocks on the back door.
- 2) Russian and Chinese wholesale exporters are currently selling choice graded chanterelles, winter chanterelles, hedgehogs and horn of plenty to Tesco at £6 per kg. These come with quality assurances and guarantees. The supermarket buys them in by the tonne. How can a man in a white van in the New Forest compete with this?



*These morels were on sale in Turkey for £15 per kg – and they airfreight well*

Finally, what about the 'proof of my own eyes' reports of commercial gangs? Well, what exactly has been seen?

- 1) Firm proof is so far lacking. There are anecdotal reports, yet no photographs or videos (and everyone has a mobile phone which could record this)
- 2) The 'conclusive proof' in most accounts (which rarely come from the actual witness, but secondhand) boils down to two factors:

- a) There was a group of East Europeans mushroom hunting
- b) They had far too many fungi for personal consumption.

Let's look at an alternative interpretation of the above. Could it possibly be that a group of Poles/Czechs/Lithuanians had got together on their day off for a bit of traditional R&R in the woods? Might they possibly know mushrooms are not only wonderful fresh, but also preserve well?



Put it another way, were you to see a pair of middle-aged English ladies emerging from a footpath, each laden with overflowing baskets of hedgerow fruit, would you instantly assume they were off to make their fortune by heading for the wholesalers? Or would you think it just possible there was going to be a lot of blackberry jam on the WI stall in two weeks' time?



*Do homemade hedgerow jams count as commercial exploitation of our natural heritage?*

Happy hunting!

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P.S. As always, let me know if you want to be removed from the list and I will do it forthwith.