

# MUSHROOM NEWSLETTER

October 18 2009



*The Elan Valley (or to be precise its Claerwen tributary) is arguably at its most beautiful in autumn*

The season continues and as usual I'm still confused about what to expect next. The range is still good, but the quantities are lamentably low. As I mentioned in the last newsletter, on my first foray we found 17 edible species and the figure was about the same on the next two<sup>1</sup>. I am still sticking to my latest theory about the porcini crop being poor because the surrounding trees had a bad summer (the more I think about it, the more valid this seems), but the warm, dry, autumn is also a factor.

The ground is undoubtedly dry and this has hit pastureland mushrooms particularly hard. I have only seen a couple of parasols this year – and no field or horse mushrooms. On the other hand the warm dry weather has undoubtedly had its benefits – we've had some stunning views on our forays and a wooded Welsh landscape can be at its best in mid-October. The other ray of sunshine is the cauliflower crop. Normally I would expect to find no more than one or two of this delicious mushroom in a season, but so far I have already found my biggest ever mushroom (3kg) and on the last foray found four in one 300-yard stretch of woodland edge.

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<sup>1</sup> Yellow swamp russula; charcoal bumer; chicken-of-the-woods; brown birch bolete; beefsteak; hedgehog; hen-of-the-woods; giant puffball; honey fungus; cauliflower; cepe/porcini; bay bolete; chanterelle; meadow waxcap; tawny grisette; deceiver; amethyst deceiver; wood blewit, Jew's ear; puffball.



*Jews ear – surely the most under-rated mushroom – but is beefsteak the most over-rated?*

One of the unexpected benefits of a poor year is that it forces one to take a fresh look at what is on offer. Take Jew's ear and beefsteak: I have always thought the first is badly under-rated in most guide books. Yes, it's got a chewy texture, but this can be overcome by shredding finely. On the other hand I have always found beefsteak grossly over-rated – bitter and slimy in the mouth. As a result I am always disparaging about its qualities, but this month I have twice been overwhelmingly out-voted by forayers – most recently at yesterday's trip around the Sidney Nolan Trust's Rodd Farm at Presteigne.



*Sickeners and fly agaric are up – and the latter is particularly encouraging (photographed 16 October)*

But let's go back to the present harvest and conditions. There are plenty of toxic species around at present, including – most encouragingly – some very young fly agaric. As this often comes up a week or so before porcini, I am still clinging to my optimistic hopes for a late flush. Also, while I have yet to find any shaggy ink caps, others report finding them in large numbers, so once I have finished this newsletter I will be toddling off to inspect my best patch (a forestry layby). If I can find a basket, I will be turning them into one of my favourite mushroom dishes – spinach and ink cap soup (see website for recipe).





*Surely no one could really mix up the common and shaggy ink cap?*

The haul at the Rodd was a bit disappointing, but we did find a largish hen of the woods as well as common ink caps. This is the edible species which reacts very badly with alcohol and whose existence steers many people away from its shaggy relative. Actually I can't see the problem who could mistake the above with a shaggy ink cap? The blusher is also common, but there are much better reasons to keep well clear of this. Although some books say it makes good eating, to my mind it looks horribly similar to the deadly panther cap and I have never tried it. A friend who has, Clive Houlder, says it's not worthwhile. As Britain's only year-round professional mushroom picker, he says he felt obliged to try it – his verdict? 'Muddy and insipid – really not worth the effort, still less the anxiety,' he says.



*The panther cap looks very like the blusher, but the latter's flesh has a pink tinge when damaged*

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