

Diana Bateman

Mushrooms and Toadstools

WWT Malvern Group

When we arrived at the Lyttelton Rooms on Thursday we were confronted by the most amazing array of fungi laid out on a large table, all beautifully labelled with common and Latin names. Diana Bateman from the Worcestershire Fungus Group then gave us a fascinating and at times humorous talk on fungi in general; her enthusiasm for her subject was infectious.



We all come into contact with fungi every day of our lives, whether we like it or not. Bread contains yeast, even fabric conditioner contains fungal enzymes. Fungi are often useful, breaking down detritus or having beneficial medical effects. Some are edible and some are not; Diana emphasised the importance of being absolutely 100% sure of identification before eating any mushroom! Fungi divide into several distinct groups, for example the amanitas (agarics), the chanterelles, the boletes, puff-balls, and Ascomycetes (including truffles). The fly agaric with its striking red cap and white spots has become the typical mushroom of fairy-tales. Our most poisonous fungus, the deathcap, is also an amanita, and is said to have been the cause of the death of the Emperor Claudius.

In the lively question and answer session which followed, there was much debate as to why we have rather lost touch with mushrooms in this country, unlike our fellow Europeans who are much more fond of collecting wild mushrooms and eating them. Perhaps it is the connection with witchcraft handed down from medieval times. There is even a theory that ergotism (poisoning caused by the consumption of infected bread) was behind the mass hysteria of the Salem witch trials.

On Chase End Hill and Midsummer Hill at the moment, there are masses of parasol mushrooms, some of them the size of dinner plates. There is a lovely patch of fly agaric on Peachfield Common. Appreciate their beauty - and don't kick them down!

The next meeting of WWT Malvern Group will be on at 7.30 pm on Nov 7th at the Lyttelton Rooms, when the biking birder, Gary Prescott, will talk about his visits to all the RSPB reserves in Britain.

Alison Uren