FUNGI WALK at RUSHBEDS WOOD on March 24th 2024

Penny Cullington

This was our first walk of the year, attended by the full quota of 18 members together with Derek, Jenny and myself. We were lucky to have a dry and bright morning though with a chilly wind and as expected wellies were definitely the order of the day – one path in particular proved quite a challenge to negotiate! It was good to welcome 6 new members and we were a happy band, thoroughly enjoying being out together again with spring flowers aplenty and chiff-chaffs singing.

Following our normal circular route it was not long before one of our three springtime target species was located. This has been a particularly good spring for the beautiful cup fungus ***Sarcoscypha austriaca*** (Scarlet Elfcup), always a delight to see and often a surprise for those not familiar with fungi. It thrives in moist deciduous woodland, growing on soggy fallen branches, so is a regular fruiter at this rather damp site and no doubt our wet warm winter / spring this year has suited it well.

Above: an attractive cluster of *Sarcoscypha austriaca* which abounded today (JW), and below the prone JW in the process of taking his photo! (SP)

A little further along the old tram track our second springtime target species was found, this one a mushroom. ***Calocybe gambosa*** (St. George's Mushroom) is another regular fruiter here along the grassy path edges. It's uncanny how often the species lives up to its English name and appears on or around St. George's Day (which is still a month away, however). All our records for this site are from April or May but I half expected it to turn up today having already had a report of it fruiting elsewhere in the county (see Member's Finds March 18th) - further proof if needed that unseasonal fungal fruiting is no longer the surprise it used to be.

Above: *Calocybe gambosa* just beginning to fruit here. (PC)

The third fungus we were hopeful of finding along the tram track was a species of Morel - another springtime genus which in past years has often turned up here – but no luck this time. It's more likely to be found in April but you never know these days ……

Still along this same track I was handed amongst other things a little cluster of Mycenoid mushrooms (ie looking similar to genus *Mycena* - the Bonnets). Both Derek and I were unsure of its genus, toying with *Galerina* or *Conocybe* as possible also, but the gill colour was not convincingly right for any of those three and I ended up thinking the likeliest was possibly *Psathyrella* (Brittlestem) – a genus often with pale gills when young though its dark spores eventually turn them almost black. At home this proved to be the case, in fact the gills were already darker by the time I worked on it, and it keyed out to the common ***Psathyrella corrugis*** (Red-edge Brittlestem). The caps in this large and very varied genus often tend to dry out and fade (technical term: hygrophanous) as can be seen happening here, also the close-up inset shows a faint reddish gill edge developing on the still pallid gills. A red gill edge is characteristic of several different Brittlestem species (and was also spotted by Derek in the field today).

Left: *Psathyrella corrugis* found today in a grassy path edge. (LS)

You'll see that there's another *Psathyrella* species on today's final list. Three other separate Brittlestem collections were also made, all looking entirely different and only one did I suspect was that genus at the time! The first was even smaller than the specimens shown above and had a rounded chestnut brown cap with white gills; the second was twice the size, had a pale greyish brown flattish cap with yellowish centre and grey gills (this one I recognised as a Brittlestem); the third had a dark grey conical cap with black rather soggy gills, well past its sell-by date and I passed to Derek thinking it was an Inkcap! At home all three had identical microscopic features which matched the springtime fruiting ***P. spadiceogrisea*** (Spring Brittlestem). No photos to share of these but this

serves as a good illustration of the puzzles we regularly encounter and of the importance and necessity of using a microscope for fungal identification.

A lump of darkish jelly on a stick was shown us at one point, and after inspection by several of us was named as ***Exidia glandulosa*** (Witch's Butter). Note the finely pimply under-surface – here showing clearly – which helps to separate the species from others in this genus which can be quite similar. Often it is distinctly blacker that this example and it fruits commonly on fallen Oak after damp weather (and we've had plenty of that recently!).

Right: *Exidia glandulosa* found on a bare deciduous stick. (LS)

In complete contrast, next we have a small slightly spiny white patch, noticed on a bare rotting log and which had us scratching our heads again. Such fungi are known as Corticioids and there are many very similar species which frequent fallen wood, sometimes affectionately known collectively as White Paint! Just a few are nameable in the field with experience, but the vast majority need skills using a scope together with specialised literature to identify. Sarah bravely took this example home and diligently worked it out for us, naming it ***Hyphodontia arguta*** (no English name) – a species found here a couple of times before. This patch was no more than an inch or so long.

Left: the Corticioid *Hyphodontia arguta* found today. (LS)

Very different yet again is the quite common and delectable *Scutellinia scutellata* (Eyelash Fungus), found today. Less than 1cm across and adorned with dark protective 'eyelashes', these tiny cups make superb photo subjects for someone as skilled as Barry - we are spoilt to have such a specialist amongst our number. Several more of his photos are to be found at the end of this report.

Right: the tiny *Scutellinia scutellata* found on a piece of rotting damp wood. (BW)

Inevitably any species list for a springtime walk will have few mushrooms as such but a preponderance of other types of fungi. Today's list of 50 species is no exception but what is exceptional, however, is the number on that list new to the site and to the county today. These are mainly down to the efforts of Stephen Plummer who has started making a particular study of the many tiny dots / blemishes / blotches on plant leaves and stems which most of us overlook and which are often prevalent at this time. He searched out and collected various samples and with scope and books has managed to identify most of them, supplying us with 5 new county records – not necessarily all rarities but often with few national records owing to the specialism and skill needed to identify them. I've added a couple of examples at the end and we look forward to his continued success!

The find of the day, however, has to be Joanna's strange tiny ochre yellow blob on a stiff springy stem – only a couple of inches long – which she extracted undamaged from some woody debris. At first glance this could have been a small undeveloped mushroom of some sort, but the stem was unlike that of a mushroom and a x10 lens revealed the blob was covered in tiny dark pimples just beneath the surface, indicating a type of ascomycete (one of the spore-shooters) though very different from the various cup fungi (also ascomycetes) seen today. These pimples are the ostioles through which the mature spores are forcibly ejected. A couple of us realised simultaneously that this was possibly some sort of *Cordyceps* (Caterpillar Club) and got excited because these are rare finds – some of them very rare. Sarah volunteered to take it home to work on and successfully took a sporeprint overnight which made her job that much easier, identifying it eventually as ***Ophiocordyceps gracilis*** (no English name), usually occurring in spring and new to the site, also only our second county record. This is a parasitic fungus which invades the body of some underground grub / moth pupa, inwardly absorbing its contents before sending up its fruiting body to distribute spores. Sometimes with care (and if you recognise the fruiting body for what it is first) it's possible to dig down and extract the whole including the unfortunate host still attached. We have Barry's detailed photos but even so it's not possible to make out what that host might have been in this case though there are clearly some remnants at the base amongst the yellow mycelial strands. This will be dried and sequenced to confirm its identity.

Above: *Ophiocordyceps gracilis* today – our most exciting find. (BW)

Thank you all for coming and making the morning such a lively and fun session. Thanks as always to our photographers too. For further details of what we found see the complete list. A late addition to our list was added by Barry Webb: the slime mould ***Calomyxa metallica*** – a new species for the county. Photos are included in Members' Finds.

Photographers
BW = Barry Webb; JW = Justin Warhurst; LS = Linda Seward; PC = Penny Cullington; SP = Stephen Plummer.

The Slime Mould *Ceratiomyxa fruticulosa* (Coral Slime) on rotting soggy bare wood – this tiny example is less than 5mm tall! (BW)

The Ascomycete *Dasyscyphella nivea* (a Disco with no common name) also on rotting soggy bare wood. Each tiny fruiting body – less than 5mm across - has a distinct stem and the underside is covered in fine 'hairs'. (BW)

Another Slime Mould: *Physarum album* (no English name), maybe 3mm tall at most and also on rotting soggy bare wood. (BW)

Above: *Hymenochaete corrugata* (Glue Crust) literally fixing two dead attached Hazel twigs together – a common species at this site where Hazel is plentiful. (LS)

Left: *Ramularia pratensis* on a Bitter Dock leaf – a second county record - and Right: *Spermosporina aricola* on an Arum Lily leaf – new to the county. (SP)

……. and finally ……

Sarah watching Barry at work today with the group in the background (LS)