Foray at Priestfield Arboretum on Saturday, November 7th

Penny Cullington

Our final foray of the main fruiting season was joint with Friends of Priestfield Arboretum, and our group of about 12 (half and half members and friends) braved a rather unpleasant morning of wind and rain to explore the fungi of this interesting site which was new to the group with very little previous recording done here. This is an area of about 5 acres with a good variety of trees, mainly coniferous, both native and non-native, some now almost 100 years old, with grassy rides between, though we found very little fruiting in the grass areas quite possibly due to the regime of leaving the cuttings in situ which not only builds up layers of thatch but also increases the nitrogen levels in the soil. Just one species of *Hygrocybe* (Waxcap) and a few specimens of *Mycena* (Bonnet) turned up in the grass, but as the site is managed primarily for the trees and is not a nature reserve it would be surprising if considerations for encouraging fungi were a priority here.

We managed a meagre list of under 40 species though the weather together with the lateness in the season and the numbers of fallen leaves were not in our favour. The most productive areas seemed to be the conifer litter and we were greeted at the start by carpets of the small mycenoid *Baeospora myosura* (Conifercone cap). These were fruiting not just amongst the needles of various conifers but also on the cones themselves and on the fallen flakes of bark. Sadly I took no photos today (due to the weather) but am including here a couple of images from elsewhere to make this report a useful source of information not for members but also for the Arbortum management team who seemed keen to learn about the fungi present here.

We came across a sizable clump of another species which was happily fruiting in conifer litter: *Collybia peronata* (Wood woollyfoot) is one which is also found in deciduous litter but seems more common under conifers. Look for the whitish furry growth at the stem base and gills which are similar in colour to the palish brown cap (which belies the fact that it has a white sporeprint); this together with the rather rubbery texture should help recognition, though this species is quite frequently misidentified.

***Collybia peronata*, today found in conifer litter but above in Derbyshire (2007) in deciduous litter. (PC)**

Another common species we found, again under conifer today though not confined to this substrate, was *Lepista nuda* (Wood Blewit). A popular edible species which at first sight would seem easy to recognise due to its sweet smell and beautiful lilac gills and stem, it should be noted that other poisonous fungi (from the genus *Cortinarius* – Webcap) can also sport these colours. A sporeprint is a good way to sort the sheep from the goats here: pale salmon pinkish in the *Lepista* but rusty brown in all species of *Cortinarius*, some of which are deadly poisonous! A point here: collecting for the pot is ***not*** recommended unless you are either very experienced or have a knowledgeable mycologist to hand to check your identification first. Incidentally, to take a sporeprint cut the cap off the stem and place it gills down on a piece of paper (white is best if you suspect the spores are dark, conversely dark is best if you suspect the spores are pale). Cover with a pot / bowl to prevent air currents and leave for several hours / ideally overnight in a cool spot (but not the fridge). Admire in the morning!

Below: *Lepista nuda* from Pulpit Hill, Bucks, earlier this year. (NW)

Of the brackets we found on wood, the most unwelcome from the point of view of the health of the trees was *Heterobasidion annosum* (Root rot). A species mainly found on conifer wood but one which will also spread to and attack deciduous trees, it is considered a serious pathogen. It has a strong distinctive resinous 'fungussy' smell, and was growing on several fallen pine trunks we came across. More information is available online if required.

There are six species of *Mycena* (Bonnet) on our list; only one, *M. galopus* (Milking bonnet) was identifiable in the field, this due to its dcharacteristic white juice which exudes from the stem when damaged. The rest needed microscope work to name as is often the way with this genus. Continuing the conifer theme here, two of the species only occur in conifer litter and are not that often recorded. These were *Mycena cinerella* (Mealy bonnet) and *M. capillaripes* (Pink edge bonnet), and I was pleased to have a chance to work on them as it's the first time I've seen either of these species this year. The first has a distinctive smell of meal or flour and also has decurrent gills (gills which slope down the top of the stem rather than joining the stem abruptly). The second has a smell of bleach and a faintly pinkish beige coloured edge to the gills which one needs a x10 lens to see in the field but it becomes clearer under higher magnification. Their caps are less than 1 cm across and neither are particularly impressive species to look at being extremely similar to many other species of this large and difficult genus which can only be identified with certainty by examining cells on the gill edge x 400 under the microscope.

On our list only two (the *Boletus* and the *Russula*) are recognised mycorrhizal species (those which grow in mutually beneficial symbiosis with trees) though it is getting late in the season for this type of fungus, and it soon became clear as we went round that the conifer areas were by far the more productive for fungi, both on the fallen wood and in the litter.

No doubt we only touched the surface of the number of species which must occur here, but at least we've made a start and hopefully this report will stimulate more people who frequent the site to take an interest in the fungi which grow here. My thanks to all the attendees for sticking it through to the end of what was a somewhat soggy affair.

For more information on what we found see the detailed list.

Photos: NW = Nick White; PC = Penny Cullington