

# A simple guide to Fungus Forays

A fungus foray can be a very rewarding experience. Much of the fun comes from looking. Some fungi (the plural of fungus) are large and easy to spot. Others are small and require careful searching to find. They are often very attractive, but they can also be smelly, and rather unpleasant. Above all you have to remember that some are poisonous and people can die from eating them. These notes are intended as an introduction to fungus forays, and include guidance on collecting, identifying and some simple do's and don'ts to ensure that your experience is safe and enjoyable.

## What is a fungus?

Fungi are now regarded as separate from plants and animals. Most fungi obtain food by breaking down and absorbing materials that surround them. They do this through thread like structures called hyphae that are buried within the "host" of the fungus eg wood, ground, leaf litter. This part of the fungus is known as the mycelium. The fruiting bodies, of which the traditional mushroom is the most familiar, are the reproductive structures of fungi. When conditions are right, usually a combination of moisture and temperature, they appear and shed spores. These spores can then be transferred elsewhere and grow into fresh mycelium. This means that fungi are not threatened with extinction by collecting, as is the case with plants in flower. However, excessive collecting can spoil other people's enjoyment and deprive insects and animals of valuable food, so you should collect only enough specimens for identification purposes. Full guidelines on collecting are available from the British Mycological Society at [http://www.fungi4schools.org/Reprints/Pickers\\_code.pdf](http://www.fungi4schools.org/Reprints/Pickers_code.pdf).

## How do you look for and collect fungi?

There are three aspects to a foray; knowing **where**, and **when, to go**; knowing **where to look**; and then **collecting the fungi**. To some extent the "where to go" is a matter of experience, because you learn from others the sites that are likely to be productive. As a general rule fungi are most plentiful in areas of **high biodiversity**. For example undisturbed areas such as **old woods** and **grassland, rich in general plant species**, usually support good populations of fungi. **Warm and moist** conditions favour fungal growth, and **October and November** are usually the best months to foray. But this is very dependent on rainfall and, in a poor summer, the months of July, August and September can be also be productive, particularly in open grassland. In general fungi are frost sensitive but some are not and persist into December. A minority of fungi fruit in the spring.

Knowing how to collect a fungus is important. Try to ensure that you have a representative specimen in good condition. Fungi vary in shape and size during their development. When a fungus is just emerging it may look very different from its fully developed shape. Similarly a fungus that is decaying can be difficult to identify. Collecting a complete specimen is also important. The part that is most often damaged is the base of the stem. Using a knife to undercut the base and lever the specimen out whole is often the best method of collection. Ideally it should then be stored in something flat, such as a wicker basket, not in a plastic bag.

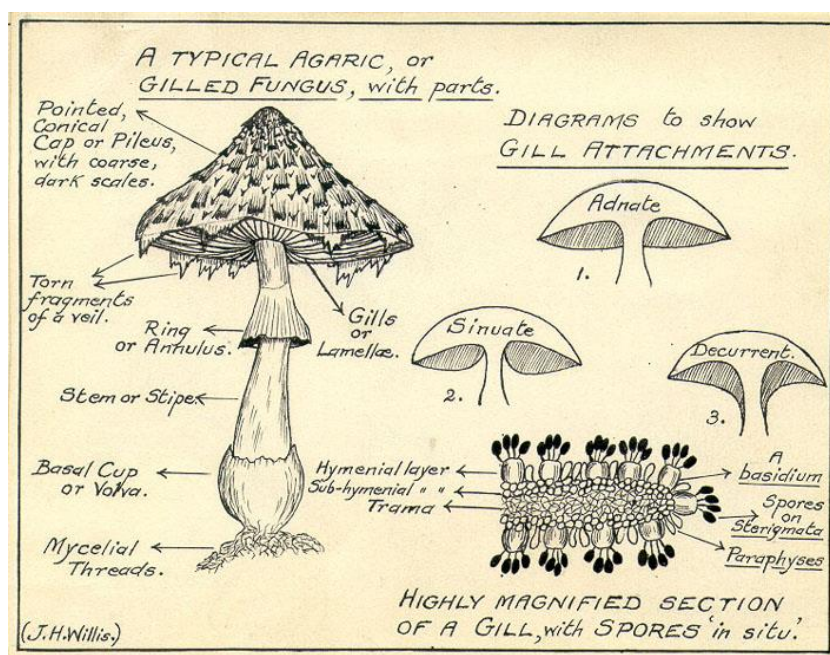
## How do you identify a fungus?

There are a number of steps in identification (use illustration for reference)

- General structure – does it have a cap? If so does it have gills? does it have a veil?
- Habitat – is it in woods, or grassland? what tree is it growing on, or under?

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- Size – measure the size of the cap and stem (length and diameter)
  - Cap – what shape / colour is the cap? is it smooth, slimy, rough?
  - Stem – is the colour the same as the cap? Is there a volva at the base?
  - Gills – are there few or many? how do they attach to the stem (see picture)?
  - Spores – what colour are the spores? (gills may give a clue – if not do a spore print)
  - Smell and taste – some fungi have a characteristic smell – others may have a characteristic taste (use tip of tongue or chew a very small piece and spit it out)
- Once you have gathered the above information you are in a position to go to a book or look on the internet to try identify your specimen. There are quite a number of books available, but they vary in quality and scope. It would be sensible to have a thorough browse before buying anything. The fungus section on First-nature.com is a good starting point on the internet (<http://www.first-nature.com/fungi/index.php>)



### Health and safety on a fungus foray – some simple points

- Don't get lost on a foray – going into a large wood can be disorientating and it is easy to lose contact with others – bear in mind it gets dark early in autumn/winter
- Protect yourself by wearing sensible footwear (you will cover rough ground)
- Watch carefully for natural features that may cause injury eg roots that may trip you up, branches that may poke you in the eye and brambles that may snare you
- If you use sharp instruments use them carefully
- Some simple precautions against poisoning:
  - Know which fungi are poisonous and learn to identify them
  - Don't put fungi in your mouth unless you are "tasting for identification"
  - Wash your hands after a foray before eating
  - Take special care when you are out with young children especially in relation to washing hands and using a knife