NEW FOREST ADVENTURES

Trips to the forest (Epping 1953-1958, Virginia Water 1959-1967, Rowfant 1973-1982, New Forest 1983-2011) have formed an integral part of my life. Since both of my parents grew up in forested regions of Poland, they brought their love of wildlife and nature to post-war England, and have passed it on to me. There is something special about being in a forest: the beauty of unspoilt surroundings, the smell of clean air scented delicately with vegetation, the tranquility and harmony of the natural world. Our family visits during all these years have always additionally had a practical aim: getting something for nothing. That something was food, in the form of fungi. Collecting wild fungi is an ancient tradition which is practised in most European countries, except Britain. For this reason, our pickings (usually plentiful) were sometimes subject to embarassing moments: I vividly remember the expressions of horror on my parents' faces when a paper carrier bag full of fine specimens split open on Uxbridge Road in Shepherds Bush on an autumn afternoon in 1958. Passers-by gaped in amazement and horror at these strange foreigners (i.e. us), who seemed destined to poison themselves with toadstools. And yet, after eating them for almost 60 years, we are all still alive and well today.

Times have now changed, and with a great influx of Europeans into Britain coupled with a broad minded education, wild fungi picking has become a popular pastime with many, including our own pupils from Highgate School. Last year's trip to the New Forest was particularly successful, with many pupils finding interesting species of fungi.

This year, I have found a large number of interesting creatures, including a lizard, frog, and a caterpillar.

On October 1st however, with unusually warm temperatures in Southern England, I encountered a most interesting phenomenon - lying under a tree in an area of the forest with no paths I noticed a peculiar red lily. I looked up at the tree, to see whether or not the lily had grown there – no chance silly Szydlo – lilies don't grow on trees! It then occurred to me that maybe someone had walked through the forest carrying a bunch of lilies, one of which had fallen out – most unlikely, I thought! Oh well, I thought to myself, it must be one of those mysteries of Nature which will never be solved. So I dismissed the matter and walked on. A few yards further however, I noticed another lily, and then another. Perhaps, I thought, this was some rare kind of lily plant whose flower grew straight out of the ground?

As I bent over to inspect it more closely I detected the pungent and disgusting smell which is reminiscent of a fungus called the stinkhorn (or *phallus impudicus* as it is known in Latin, on account of its shape). I then observed that the lily was in fact growing out of the ground, and that it grew from a sac which is exactly like that of a stinkhorn. Furthermore **it** was responsible for the putrid smell, and there were flies sitting on it, exactly as they do on stinkhorns – that is how stinkhorns reproduce – flies spread their spores.

Looking carefully around I then spotted about 5 more of these fungi – I had never seen anything like this before. It then occurred to me that perhaps I had made a new discovery? Perhaps I had discovered a fungus which no-one had ever seen? Perhaps this was going to be my claim to fame – a new fungus called the *Szydlo Stinkhorn*! Wow – that **would** be fun! I called over my 10 year old son Oskar and explained to him the reason for my great excitement. I took several photographs. My pulse raced as I had visions of newspaper headlines: "Highgate schoolteacher discovers exotic fungus in New Forest." Unfortunaley Oskar did not share my enthusiasm: "Can we go back to the car, I'm hungry", was all he could say as I almost suffocated while taking closeup photographs of the strange organism. As we walked back to the car park in Bank (about 1 mile away), I imagined TV crews arriving to film the fungus and botanists from Kew Gardens arriving on Monday morning with cameras and specimen bottles. **Most** exciting, I thought.

Back at the car park, I reported the event to my wife, who agreed that the discovery was interesting and returned with me to take some more photographs. As it happened, my brother (who knows much more about fungi than I do) was in anothet part of the forest at the same time. I rang him and excitedly reported my discovery. We both had our Phillips Mushroom Guides (Roger Phillips, an Englishman (!) is one of the world's great authorities on fungi, and his celebrated Atlas, published in 1981 is the standard reference field guide on this topic) and a quick exchange between us revealed that nothing similar to what I had found, had been described in his book. He also agreed to come to Bank and photograph the specimens. Both he and I knew, of course, that the Phillips Guide is by no means an exhaustive documentation of all fungi and that the ultimate and most up to date authority on this matter would be the Internet. For it is here that fungus freaks list their unusual finds, together with photographic documentation etc. Nevertleless, my particular find was sufficiently unusual to merit continued mild excitement on my part.

On arriving home shortly afetr 11pm that day, I rushed to the computer and Googled "stinkhorn", hoping to find pictures of conventional stinkhorns with which I was familiar, but **not** the specimen which I had found. To my slight disappointment however, among the several dozen images of conventional stinkhorns which appeared, there were indeed 2 or 3 which were just like mine. Three names were used to describe them – devil's finger, dead man's finger and octopus stinkhorn. All amazingly apt! However, this particular fungus is native to Tasmania, Australia and Hawaii. Apparently one specimen has been recorded in France in 1940, and 2 sightings have occurred in England – one in Sussex 10 years ago and one in the New Forest 2 years ago. Maybe not a major news story, but by all accounts, this was a very good find! It's Latin (systematic) name is *Clathrus archeri* and I am delighted to be able to share my images (though mercifully not the smell) with you. I have no idea what the Latin name means, but it is worth noting that the classification of living organisms, using Latin names, underpins the science of biology. This formidable task was first undertaken by the Swede Karl Linnaeus (1707-1778) – in his celebrated book *A History of Scientific Ideas* (1959), Charles Singer wrote : "Linnaeus was an extremely stimulating teacher. He had a great number of enthusiastic pupils, many of whom went on expeditions to distant lands and discovered and described multitudes of species… Much of the immense appeal of Linneaus was due to his appreciation of wildlife."

My experience in the new Forest has prompted some further thoughts: why do crackpots like me get excited about finding a foul smelling evil-looking plant? The fact is that weird and wonderful living objects such as our octopus stinkhorn will always be a source of great interest for naturalists. It is through their study that we hope one day to answer one of the most perplexing questions of science: how did life begin on Earth?

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