

In this week's lifestyle section:
RHET update, fungi foraging

Lifestyle pages
edited by
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Foraging for fungi finds

By Karen Carruth

Photographs: Catherine Laurenson

AS SUMMER is bulldozed by the rampaging weather that is currently hitting the UK, a trace of a silver lining can be found for those who enjoy taking advantage of the free food that can be found in the UK's countryside at this time of year.

Foraging is enjoying something of a renaissance, with guided trips becoming more popular, as food-conscious consumers want to learn more about where their food comes from. And if you have picked it off a tree, or from the ground yourself, there is no doubt about where your food came from.

Mark Williams, who runs Galloway Wild Foods, says that since the 1970s, when Richard Maybe published a book called 'Food for Free' the interest in foraging for mushrooms, berries, and edible leaves is reaching an all time high.

Mark leads guided walks around Galloway's forests, shores and hedgerows. He says with its mild, damp climate and wide variety of habitats, the region offers the perfect growing conditions for all manner of delicious flora, fauna and fungi. There are few places in Britain that offer such an ideal environment for learning to forage.

We joined Mark on a fungi forage last week to discover just how careful you had to be when picking mushrooms. And the answer is, very!

With around 40 people on the walk, even though the rain was torrential all day, I think we were all impressed that so many had turned up. Even so, after a brief safety chat, (Mark is a member of the Galloway Mountain Rescue team, so we were in safe hands), and a talk about the different varieties of mushrooms we were likely to come across, we set off on a two-hour wander through the woods to see what we would discover.

The message that came across very clearly is, if you are not sure that the mushroom you have picked is safe, then don't



MARK WILLIAMS holding a fully grown fly agaric, demonstrating the distinguishing marks. If you are not sure if a mushroom is safe then leave it alone TSF



FLY AGARIC – beautiful but not edible. A young button just emerging. A hallucinogenic mushroom that can also make you quite ill, but seldom fatal TSF

take the chance. A guide book is essential when foraging, as one mushroom can look very much like another.

And without the expert knowledge found in a guide book, you could easily make a mistake and find yourself in trouble. Several good edible mushrooms have sinister poisonous lookalikes that may differ by a webbed edge around the gills or something equally as small. Small differences really matter in the mushroom world.

Over the last few years the number of people requiring medical treatment after eating poisonous fungi has risen. John Wright, the recognisable 'mushroom man' from the River Cottage TV programmes, says the most commonly eaten poisonous mushroom is the yellow stainer which is easily confused with common edible varieties like the field mushroom or shop-bought mushrooms.

I don't want to cast a gloomy picture over fungi foraging, as there is fun, fresh air and delicious free food to be had, but it is important to stress that respect is needed.

So, the message is, take your guide book, or better still, go out with an expert! Mark Williams suggests that it is more important to learn the five deadly mushrooms first, and then build up your knowledge of the edible ones over time. Even an experienced forager like Mark was checking his guidebook regularly.

Mark advises beginners to start with three tasty, common and easily recognisable species: Chanterelles, Hedgehog mushrooms, and Orange Birch Boletes which are not hard to find in Scottish woodlands.

Having some knowledge of trees is an advantage, as it is easier to identify a mushroom from where you found it growing.

A little mystery all of its own. For example, a golden funnel shaped mushroom growing under a spruce tree could be a false chanterelle: under beech or birch tree and you could have the real thing.

Mark encourages you to use all your senses when you are mushroom picking. And to enjoy the unique beauty and diversity that you find in all fungi – edible or not. His take on the upsurge in popularity is that it is the most natural thing for humans to do is forage. It is only within the last few centuries that food has become more convenient to locate.

Before that, for thousands of years, humans lived off the land, moving around to gather what was seasonally available. So he thinks it is genetically programmed into our DNA to forage. He may be right, as it is a thoroughly enjoyable and fulfilling pastime.

There are other treasures to behold on a forage and if you know what to look for, it can take a long time to cover a short distance as you constantly stop, pick, nibble, wander.

Brambles are delectable at this time of year, and we also picked wood sorrel, common sorrel, hazelnuts, blaberries, sloes and crab apples.

What better way to dry off than to have a mushroom fry up after walking in the rain for two hours. Back at the bothy on the Garroch Estate, Mark cooked up



SLIMY BEECH tuft (aka porcelain or poached egg fungus). Was growing quite high on a beech tree. Edible, but slimy and not worthwhile TSF



A CEP mushroom – the king of mushrooms, and delicious! They are particularly delicious when pan fried with salted or garlic butter TSF



THE GROUP during the tour stop and listen to information about the latest find TSF



TAKING SOME of the day's finds back to identify TSF



BACK AT the bothy frying up the day's finds, along with home made bread and elderflower champagne TSF

Further Galloway Wild Food forages:

Sunday, September 25 – Creetown day of the Regions Taster Foray
Sunday, October 2 – Day of the Regions Taster Foray – Gatehouse of Fleet
Sunday, October 23 – One-day foraging course with gourmet foragers lunch – focussed on fungi, but there will be plenty of nuts, fruits and berries too.

See the Galloway Wild Foods website events calendar for full details on www.gallowaywildfoods.com

Useful reading:

Mark's website has a wealth of free tips and introduces safe, tasty and accessible species as they come into season.

Food for Free, Richard Maybe
The Forager's Handbook, by Miles Irving
Hedgegrows, Mushrooms and Seashore, all by John Wright
Foraging, self sufficiency, David Squire
Wild Mushrooms of Britain and Europe, Roger Phillips
Wild Food, Roger Phillips
Black's Nature Guides on plants, trees and fungi are all excellent field guides.

Mushrooming fun at Loch Leven

THERE ARE lots of foraging courses on at the moment, have a search on local websites for more details. Loch Leven is the venue for a free walk coming up next month.

In previous years, participants have spotted more than 60 different species on Loch Leven's fungi forays. SNH staff will be joined by local expert Richard Smith from Lochore Meadows Country Park, on the hunt for fungi. Participants will see many different types of fungi, learn which ones are dangerous, and find out how humans have used fungi throughout history as medicines, hallucinogens and in cooking.

Fungi are also essential recyclers of the woodland, often feeding on nutrients in dead wood and organic matter, thereby opening up wooded areas for new growth.

Craig Nisbet, SNH reserve officer, said: "This is one of my favourite walks of the year; there are

so many wacky and wonderful fungi. It's amazing how many different types of fungi there are in the world – 200,000 species of fungi and over 3000 larger fungi in the UK – and how important they all are to the health of our woodlands."

Lying beneath the shadow of the Lomond Hills, Loch Leven is the largest loch in lowland Scotland and one of the most important sites for waterfowl in Britain. A national nature reserve since 1964, its size and the richness and variety of habitats provide a unique environment that attracts not only the largest concentration of breeding ducks found anywhere in the UK, but also many thousands of migratory ducks, geese and swans.

■ The walk takes place on Sunday, October 16, from 2 to 5pm, starting at the Findatie car park. To book a place, phone the SNH reserve office on 01577 86 44 39.



The Royal Highland Education Trust (RHET)

Taking the classroom to the countryside

RHET take 440 kids to the countryside

By Nicola Cunningham

SEPTEMBER'S BEEN a busy month so far for the RHET team as, in addition to the usual hectic schedule of farm visits and classroom talks, three Food and Farming Days have taken place.

Over these three days a total of 440 children travelled to the countryside to take part in a day of activities relating to local food production and farming. These Food and Farming events are sponsored by the Scottish Government (Food and Drink Industry Division) and are designed to give pupils a better awareness of where the food on their plate is produced, plus the importance of the Scottish countryside.

Day one was organised by RHET Clyde, took place on September 8 at Fernieshaw Farm in Cleland where primary six children from seven Glasgow and Lanarkshire schools participated in a variety of 'hands-on' activities and discussions, exploring dairy production, cereals and vegetables, beef production and farm machinery. The children tried their hand at butter-making and ground grain to make flour.

RHET Clyde is grateful to William Bankier, of Fernieshaw Farm, for allowing the event to be held on site and to the RHET volunteers and activity providers, including Wiseman's, Galloway and Macleod and QMS for their time. RHET would also like to thank Allan Bowie, vice-president of NFU Scotland, for attending and speaking to the children about farming.



BUTTER FUN – from RHET Clyde day at Fernieshaw Farm, children are from Whiteinch Primary School



RHET DUMBARTON, Lomond and Renfrew day at Luss Estates, children are from St Mary's (Alexandria) primary school

The Royal Highland Education Trust,

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