

U3A Port Fairy
Science...naturally!
Fungi Foray in Port Fairy

Jane Lee April 2020



This is the sixth in a series of self-guided walks around Port Fairy to help relieve the tedium of COVID-19. The aim of the walks is to provide enjoyable outdoor activities that can be undertaken either by yourself or your family (with appropriate COVID-19 separation and other precautions). This guide does not have a particular walking route but rather provides some information on what to look out for wherever you walk in Port Fairy.

Foraging and photographing fungi has been my passion for the past 15 years. Over the years I have spent a great deal of time lying on the ground, kneeling and twisting my body to extremes to photograph fungi. While I am far from being an authority on fungi - they are quite difficult to identify with confidence – it is the sheer delight of discovering a new one that brings excitement and great joy.

The fungi kingdom is vast and complex and, without it, the world would not exist as it does today. The benefits we get from fungi are many, the most obvious being penicillin. But the ecosystems of the world rely on fungi to breakdown dead plants and other organisms to provide food not only for humans but for all life on earth.

Fungi comes in so many different shapes and sizes, some have bizarre lifestyles, some glow in the dark and some smell putrid. But the stunning colours and intricate shapes always make up for any of their weird ways.

Fungi is not something to be afraid of even though there are some very poisonous species. Identifying edible fungi is not always easy and my warning is **don't eat any unless you are absolutely sure it is not poisonous**. However, just touching them will not kill but remember to wash your hands after handling them.

For this guide I have assembled some photos of fungi I have found in Port Fairy. You probably won't see all of them today but as you walk around in the next few months, particularly after rain, keep your eyes open – they will be there somewhere.

Not all fungi have gills like a common mushroom. Some have pores, some are jelly like, some resemble coral, some are slimy, and others look like poo!



Fungi in leaf litter



Fungi with pores



Fungi with gills



Fungi like coral

You have probably all had fungi come up in your lawns and in your gardens, they particularly like wood chips so you don't have to go far to look. If you can avoid it, don't mow over them as they provide nutrients to the soil and are generally very good for your garden. While a few fungi species may kill trees, most form an important symbiotic relationship with the trees where both the tree and fungus gains benefit from the association.

Let's foray!

Early Autumn after good rains usually brings on the fungi season so now is a good time to foray for fungi.

As fungi can be found in most places there is no set walk. Just use the guide to help you identify the common fungi as you go on your various walks around town. Pay particular attention to areas of woodchips and leaf litter, nature strips, parks and gardens (especially your own) – in fact any area that has dead and rotting vegetation.

If you are walking around town, through the Russell Clarke Reserve or Seacombe Caravan Park you should find some Lawyer's Wig or Shaggy Ink Cap *Coprinus comatus* growing out through the grass. They are easily recognised by their tall shaggy dome and as they age they exude a gooey black ink as the gills disintegrate (this is how they spread their spores). They are edible but you need to get them before they start to disintegrate.

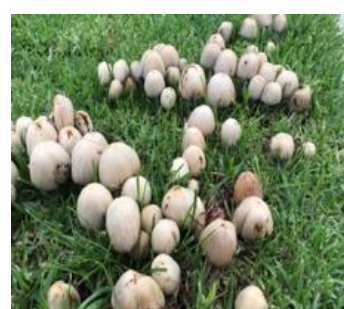
You will also probably see troops of Fairy Ink Cap *Coprinus disseminatus*. It grows on rotting wood, so you are most likely to see it where old street trees have been removed. Like the Lawyers Wigs the Fairy Ink Caps also disintegrate rapidly and can turn into a black inky mess in just 24 hours.



Lawyers Wig



Lawyers Wig disintegrating



Fairy Ink Cap troop

Under the trees and shrubs at the start of the rail trail you may find some large puffballs about the size of your fist. The outer skin of the Hard-skinned Puffball *Scleroderma cepa* cracks open and exposes the mass of dark brown spores which are distributed by wind. You may also be lucky enough to find an Earth Star *Geastrum* species which can be recognised by a small soft puffball surrounded by an outer frill making it look like a little star.



Hard-skinned Puffball



Puffball with spores exposed



Earth Star in leaf litter

Another group to look out for in the leaf litter, or in your vegie garden if you have recently added some horse manure or pea straw, are cup fungi. There are a number of species but they all form little brown, fawn or even orange, fragile cups that sit directly on the surface of the litter. The one you are most likely to see is the Fawn Cup Fungi *Peziza vesiculosa*. All are saprophytes (live on dead matter) and the spores are spread thinly on the inside surface of the cup. My cup runneth over !



Fawn Cup Fungi in the litter



Yellow Stainer – looks like a mushie but stains yellow



Yellow Stainers *Agaricus xanthodermus* are often mistaken for edible field mushrooms. They look like the common mushie and have pink to brown gills but beware! Test them by bruising the cap of the fungi with your fingernail – if it turns yellow where you have bruised it – **Do not eat it**. It is not deadly but it will make you sick and give you a tummy ache.

There are a number of fungi species to be found on rotting logs and branches. The Rainbow Shelf fungi *Trametes versicolour* can be recognised by the coloured growth lines. The less colourful but more densely grouped Split-gill Bracket *Schizophyllum commune* can be recognised by its fan shape and, if you look underneath, its longitudinally split gills (hence the genus name).



Rainbow Shelf on a rotting log



Dense group of Split-gill Bracket



Little fans of Split-gill Brackets



If you have ever seen a Morel *Morchella elata* you will understand what a strange looking fungus it is. I encountered one about 4 years ago growing in wood chips at the entrance to Battery Hill which had been recently cleared, revegetated and mulched. It is the only one I have seen in Port Fairy but keep your eyes peeled, there may be more. They are edible and prized as a culinary delicacy, but you would need more than one to make a meal!



Tiny little Pixie Hats *Mycena* species are quite common growing out of the bark of fallen trees and branches. There are many species, some brightly coloured, but all are small - about the size of a 5 cent coin (remember them?) – and fragile.

And if you look closely, often under the branches of Black Wattle trees you may see a black tongue projecting about 5-8 cm above the ground. Not much to look at but all the action is going on under the ground. The fungus is called a Vegetable Caterpillar *Cordyceps*

gunnii and it infects then consumes Bardi Grubs (moth larvae living in the soil). The fungus fruiting body (the black bit above ground that has the spores) grows out of the mummified Bardi Grub which may be up to 30 cm below the ground surface.



Vegetable Caterpillar



The very recognisable Fly Agaric *Amanita muscaria* is very common under introduced Birch and Pine trees with which it has a symbiotic relationship. Beware! **This fungus is very poisonous.** The genus *Amanita* is responsible for most deaths in the world due to fungal poisoning. It is not to be fooled with.

The beautiful Purple Veil *Cortinarius archeri* is also possibly poisonous but with magnificent colours like that it is better appreciated by looking and photographing than eating anyway.



This is just a snap-shot of what is to be found. Port Fairy has many more fungal species just waiting to be discovered. If you do find a fungus that you are not sure of, take a photo and send it in picture There are many additional species in the forests to our north, west and east.

If you find a fungus and want to know what it is, email me a picture and a short description and Jane will endeavour to work it out for you. Email to: **jmiller3350@gmail.com**

Happy foraying (and not foraging).