

Cairn Wood - Fungus Foray

27th September 2015

Leader Dr Alistair McCracken

Members assembled at **Cairn Wood** near **Craigantlet** on a sunny morning. There was a warning notice about *Phytophthora ramorum* – the disease affecting larch trees and rhododendron. Dr McCracken is a specialist in plant diseases and he explained that 1200 hectares of larch trees in N. Ireland were affected. This has led to the cutting down of thousands of trees. The other serious tree disease is *Chalara fraxinea* - **Ash Dieback Disease**. So far it has only been found in recently planted trees, but could have a devastating effect on our landscape and wildlife if it spread to the general population. The manufacture of hurleys is at risk. Alistair told us that the affected trees began life as Irish seeds, were sent to Scotland for germination and then to Europe to grow on, where they caught the disease. When one considers how many seeds one ash tree produces, what a pity there was not a local nursery!



Pamela Thomlinson and Joan McCaughey with a Giant Puffball.



Oudemansiella mucida



Calocera cornea

Cairn Wood consists of forestry coniferous trees with old beech, birch and bilberry further uphill, so there was a variety of habitats for the Fungus Foray. There are over 12,000 species of fungi; fungi obtain their nutrition from other living organisms, the *mycelium* can cover vast areas and the *mycorrhiza* can help the host plants take up nutrition. Some are edible and some poisonous and people here are generally more cautious about which are safe to eat than those in other parts of Europe where over-picking can lead to the loss of species.

Joan McCaughey had brought an enormous **Puffball** (*Lycoperdon*) for us to examine and large enough to feed us all. Alistair said there would be enough spores in 2 similar puffballs to colonise the world. We examined the bootlace strands of **Honey Fungus** (*Armillariella mellea*), which can spread for hundreds of metres to infect more trees. Boletus fungi have pores and tubes rather than gills and the **Penny Bun** (*Boletus edulis*) is a popular food. The shiny white appearance of the **Slimy Beech Tuft** (*Oudemansiella mucida*) gives it its name of the **Porcelain Fungus**. Another fungus named from its appearance is the edible **Lawyer's Wig** (*Coprinus comatus*). The pretty violet-coloured **Amethyst Deceiver** (*Laccaria amethystea*) was easy to spot.

We saw several species of **Jelly Fungus** growing on decaying wood - the yellow **Small Stagshorn** (*Calocera cornea*) and the **Jelly Ear** (*Auricularia auricula-judae*) which gets its Latin name and former English name because Judas Iscariot traditionally hung himself from its host tree, the Elder. It was used in folk medicine for sore ears and jaundice and in modern medicine is being examined as an anti-tumour, anti-coagulant and cholesterol-reducing drug. The **Beech Jelly Disc** (*Neobulgaria pura*) appeared on a rotting beech branch in all its stages from small disc to a horrible to touch slimy mush.

Bracket Fungi can go on growing for years, becoming hard and developing into lignum. The **Artist's Bracket** (*Ganoderma applanatum*) can be used as an artist's medium. The fresh fungus can be rubbed or scratched and shaded and the picture remains when it dries. *Ganoderma* means 'shiny skin' and the *Ganoderma* species are used in traditional Asian medicine, in modern herbal medicine and have potential in bio-medicine.

Fungi, therefore, are essential for re-cycling nutrients, assisting decay, providing food and poisons, and of future importance in developing new medicines. Alistair was thanked for yet again leading us on a pleasant and informative excursion to end our 2015 botanical season.

Margaret Marshall