

Country diary: the forest floor offers a rich feast for foragers

23 September 2019



Just after dawn, mist half concealed the line of trees along the Roman road that edges [the village](#). Hoping for one of those classic September mornings where the valley fog burns away to leave a flawless blue sky, I made my plans. Perhaps inevitably, the day that actually emerged was dull and leaden, leaving the heathland vegetation of the New Forest looking dark and suddenly barren.

Beyond a band of tightly cropped pasture, the edge of the mixed woodland looked unnaturally linear. Planted in the 1960s, the base of the foliage canopy has been consistently browsed as high as they can reach by the sturdy New Forest ponies, giving conveniently regular headroom for even the tallest walker.

Coming across isolated sweet chestnut trees, their pale spiny fruit still soft and immature, brought back memories: long-distant autumn trips with family and friends to favourite copses that we knew would crop well. Timing our expeditions carefully, we would wait for the cases to harden and split, revealing the dark, shiny nuts within. This bounty was theoretically intended to be stored for a Christmas treat, yet somehow never lasted that long; the

temptation to peel away the shell to reveal the tart, firm flesh was just too strong.

Deeper into the woodland, where the air was still and dank, the ground was peppered with the fruiting bodies of fungi. So abrupt was their emergence that many had carried upwards small rafts of debris from the leaf litter. Among them were some good examples of puffballs, whose name stems from the way they distribute spores when they mature and burst. These younger versions, sliced and fried with bacon, can make an excellent breakfast – but one that should be reserved only for the confident mycologist.



As I emerged from the trees above the valley mire of Dibden Bottom, a brief moment of sunshine enhanced the rich autumn colours of the heather and grasses. Ponies grazed the wet valley floor, moving cautiously across the uncertain footing of the bog. Far into the distance, pale gravel tracks wound across the undulating heathland, offering unfettered access to this ancient landscape. Not without regret, I took a last look to fix the view in my mind, then turned aside.

Source: <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2019/sep/23/country-diary-the-forest-floor-offers-a-rich-feast-for-foragers>