



**FORAGER:** John Wright talks fellow foragers through the story of this fungi

# Foraging for our food is a human instinct claims mushroom expert

Foraging for food in the countryside is growing in popularity, but when it comes to picking fungi in the wild, it's crucial to ensure they are safe, otherwise it can be deadly. **Jamie Weir** finds out more...

**I**f you go down to the woods today, you could be in for a surprise, because while most of us just pop to the local supermarket if we want some mushrooms, a new breed of forager is getting out into the countryside to pick their own.

The rise in foraging for food has been a result of a growth in the public's interest in just where our food comes from. Farmers' markets have sprung up, while TV chefs have led the charge, regularly advocating the health, and taste benefits of buying more sustainably and locally produced food.

One TV chef has been a particularly vocal advocate of returning to a less processed, more natural and sustainable diet - Hugh Fearnley-Whittingstall.

His popular River Cottage TV show was based on a return to the ideals of growing your own vegetables, raising livestock and hunting out your own naturally grown treats through foraging for food. When Mr Fearnley-Whittingstall needs guidance on foraging for mushrooms, he turns to John Wright, who has authored four River Cottage handbooks on the subject.

Mr Wright, a renowned foraging expert, will be bringing his skills to Tunbridge Wells in October, to teach people how to forage for wild mushrooms successfully, and, perhaps more importantly, safely.

The forager has more than 30 years of experience at finding edible native fungi, sampling around 120 varieties

in his time as a forager. That figure pales when compared with the total number he might sample though, with Mr Wright telling KoS that there are more than 8,000 varieties of the larger fungi in the UK.

He said: "There are about four times as many different types of fungi in the UK as there are plants.

"Fungi is key to most plant growth, and key to life on earth, so it's obviously of incredible importance."

That importance to the rest of the environment is because of what is known as a mycorrhizal relationship.

That means the fungi has colonised a host plant's roots, using it to extract valuable sugars to help it grow.

In return the fungus is able to pass over more water and minerals to the plant, creating a 'mutualistic' relationship where both plant and fungus rely on one another to flourish.

"It's a true symbiotic relationship, with both the host and the fungi benefiting," explains Mr Wright.

He continued: "If we didn't have fungi, then the vast majority of plants simply wouldn't be able to grow."

That crucial interplay between fungus and the rest of the Earth's life could be why Mr Wright is so passionate about foraging, and reconnecting people to the world of mushrooms.

He told KoS he believes each and every one of us has an innate drive to go and find our own food.

He said: "I think that foraging is one of the instincts of humans. You take people out on a foray to find fungi, and you see them slip into this in-



**HUDDLE:** The group crowd around

stinctual style, with people being rewarded with mushrooms for following it.

"I've seen it hundreds of times; people's eyes change, and they absolutely relish finding the different fungi. There's something about it which excites them.

"Before agriculture there was no other way of getting food apart from hunting. Foraging was part of people's lives, and that's why it's such a natural thing for us to do."

However that art of foraging has largely been lost in the UK, with most people content to simply pop to the local shops, rather than take a wander into the wilds for their supper.

Despite some saying that foragers are stripping woodland of fungi, Mr Wright says that in the UK, mush-



**FUNGI:** John shows off a mushroom

room picking isn't leading to any drop in fungus populations.

In fact, Mr Wright puts the proportion of people who aren't likely to ever forage at around 95 per cent of the country's population but it isn't that high everywhere.

He said: "Our European neighbours have been foraging for many years, and are much more experienced with it than we are. That could be because we haven't suffered as much hunger in the last few hundred years, whereas many European countries have, as armies have marched over their lands."

Foraging is so popular, that in Europe families have been known to hand the best sites to forage down the generations, while in France foraged mushrooms can be taken to the phar-

macy to ensure they're safe for consumption.

Safety, according to Mr Wright is very important, with many different fungi species deadly for humans.

He told KoS: "It can be lethal, but it isn't as long as you know what you're doing. We wouldn't get into a car and drive at 80mph around the M25 if we'd never driven before, and in the same sense, if you don't have any knowledge or experience, it isn't a good idea to go out and pick mushrooms."

Foraging for mushrooms is though, far less risky than driving with just one person dying in any five year period on average.

According to Mr Wright, the split between deadly and delicious is fairly even.

He said: "In the UK about 25 varieties are absolutely delicious, but there are another 25 which can be absolutely deadly."

Mr Wright has been teaching people to forage at the Moon Down's site near Tunbridge Wells since 2011.

He's looking forward to this year's visit telling KoS: "My annual visit to Moon Down is always exciting. The varied habitat produces a wealth of interesting and often tasty fungi.

"It's one of the best places in the UK to go foraging, and I think this year is going to be absolutely fantastic."

He will be leading foraging at the site on October 13 and 14. To find out how to join the group, visit [www.moondown.co.uk](http://www.moondown.co.uk)