



THE FORAGER'S CALENDAR

A Seasonal Guide to Nature's Wild Harvests

JOHN WRIGHT



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NOTE TO THE READER

Eating wild plants, fungi, seaweeds and animals is not without its perils. Accurate identification is essential, and nothing should be eaten unless you are certain of its identity and thus edibility. This book provides sufficient information to identify all of the species mentioned, with the more difficult species described in appropriately more detail. It is not, however, a book designed primarily for identification purposes, so it is often worth checking with a further source.

Wild foods are often unfamiliar foods with the potential to disagree with individual metabolisms. This is particularly true of fungi. When eating something new, it is always worth consuming a small amount first to see if you like it and it likes you.

Some wild foods are not suitable for people suffering various infirmities and some are not suitable for expectant or nursing mothers. Advice on these is provided within the text.

Always collect from clean environments and always wash plants and seaweeds.

Most species of fungi are best cooked, and some are moderately poisonous if eaten raw.

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INTRODUCTION

At some point during September my father would announce that it was time to pick blackberries. Everyone would move instantly into action. Mother unearthed baskets, and a couple of hooked walking sticks were recovered from the aromatic cupboard under the stairs. Sandwiches were made, and a flask of tea prepared. My young sister was dragged away from her game of 'Cindy Buys a New Dress' and bundled into my father's 1928 Morris. By the 1960s the Morris was already sufficiently venerable to cause comment. We loved it and called it 'The Bus', and it ferried us over Portsdown Hill from our Portsmouth home to the glorious wilds of rural Hampshire. Those days were prickly, messy and sweet, and I loved them.

Our other family passion was to go cockle-hunting in Langstone Harbour, to the east of Portsmouth, plunging our hands in the sticky mud to find our prize. That too was a joy, though I thought cockles much inferior to blackberries as a food.

Just childhood memories, of course, but it was only recently that I began to view them in their true light. Those days were the best of my childhood because, unlike television and school, they felt completely real.

Hunters and gatherers. That is what we are, and nature rewards us, not just in the food these pursuits provide but also in the more fundamental form of rewarding our souls. On those blackberry-picking expeditions I was doing what I was meant to do, and it felt so right.

The modern world views hunting as barbaric and gathering as an absurd affectation, at best, and a damaging imposition on the natural world, at worst. But searching out our food is completely natural, with a history going back to the first animals. What it is not is a 'fad' or, worse still, a 'middle-class fad'. For our recent ancestors, and even in living memory, foraging was the natural and

obvious way to obtain food. Now the obvious thing to do is go to the supermarket or order a takeaway. In this we have lost so much, and food is merely pleasant fuel, a commodity. When we forage, we truly know the organism we choose to collect, its mode of life, its beauty, its value and its season, and in a way unobtainable from food that is bought, we feel we deserve it, we own it.

I have led around seven hundred forays over the last quarter of a century, showing people how to salt for razor clams, catch brown shrimps, identify mushrooms and plants, and the joys of seaweed. People seem to enjoy our days out, often more than they think they will. I take no great credit for this; all I do is explain things and, above all, slow my companions down. On seeing the abundance of mushrooms, or the wild extravagance of berries, a frequent comment is, 'Have you brought me to a special place?' The answer is that, yes, it is a good place, though much like many others. The difference is that today I have given them time to look.

Searching for wild food has a powerful effect on how people see the natural world. They suddenly find themselves a part of it, rather than merely an onlooker. Authorities and landowners do us all a disservice by making us 'keep off the grass', and the many excellent television programmes on natural history leave us in no doubt that they are showing a world beyond our horizons, not a world to which we belong.

Foraging immerses us in the world, and we come to know it, love it and seek to protect it. We see things we have not seen before or even imagined, such as the spectacular gall known as 'Robin's Pincushion' or the bright orange of a rust fungus on a leaf. I know that I have succeeded on one of my forays when I hear someone say, 'A walk will never be the same again!' My aim in this book is not just to show you how and when to find free, wild food, but also to encourage you during your expeditions to view the natural world around us as more than a painted backdrop to our lives, and as something exquisite in its detail.

HOW TO USE THIS BOOK

This book is in the form of a month-by-month account of what can be found when. I knew this to be a task of compromise and difficulty long before I put pen to paper. Nature has its own ideas of when things should appear, and even of whether they will appear at all. I have found Horse Mushrooms in April and Wood Blewits in June, both species half a year too early (or too late). But there is some pattern, and it is recorded here to the best of my ability and that of those naturalists and foragers I have consulted.

Most wild foods are available for more than a single month. At the back of the book you will find a calendar which lists all the wild foods mentioned in the text, placed in the months in which they might be found and with an indication of when is their main season. This information can also be found within each monthly chapter.

I have placed all the main species descriptions in the first month that their flowers, fruit, etc. are likely to be available in good quantity and condition – the most reliable month, to put it another way. Some species produce more than one edible item. The Elder, for example, provides flowers in June (and late May and much of July) and berries in August and early September. So the description of the Elder, its flowers and its berries is provided in the June chapter. In August and September the berries will be listed at the beginning of the chapters as available, and you can check back in June to find a more detailed description of the plant.

This ordering does not work for every species – Wood Ears, for example, can be found at almost any time of the year, so I have placed this mushroom in January, when it is fairly reliable (and, quite frankly, January needed a bit of a boost).

There is a side effect to this format. While many species can be found in November and December, none is first at its most

forageable during these months, so November and December have only brief descriptions, along with lists of what can be found then.

This book provides photographs and descriptions that should be enough for a reliable identification. The introductions vary in detail, depending on how difficult a species is to identify. Almost no description is provided for blackberries, but the Blusher (an excellent, edible fungus which could be confused with something unpleasant) is described in minute detail. My house is threatened with collapse under the weight of several hundred books which (with the application of a patience I sometimes lack) enable me to identify anything from diatoms to nematode worms. While you do not need to follow me in this madness, I strongly suggest a few extra books devoted to the identification of plants and fungi, at least for the more difficult species. I will always double-check an identification in every relevant book I possess. There is a list of recommended books in the Further Reading section.

I am a great avoider of introductory chapters, wishing to get straight to the meat of any book. However, I encourage you to at least read through the following notes dealing with conservation, the law and safety. Failure to do so may result in loss of karma, liberty and life respectively!

This is not a recipe book. However, I have included partial and some complete recipes within the text and suggest uses for most of the species here described. At the end of the book some processes that are useful for preserving wild foods, such as bottling juices, are described.

John Wright

Dorset, 2019

www.ediblebush.com

www.foragerscalendar.net

CONSERVATION

Who would have thought that so benign and natural a pursuit could bring such trouble? I occasionally find myself in the newspapers accused of, for example, stripping the New Forest bare of fungi (a personal favourite of mine) or of encouraging others to strip the British coast of every living thing. People quite enjoy being angry over some perceived failure of others, and newspapers need to make a living. As you will imagine, I get a little upset each time such a story appears. But it is never what I actually do that upsets them: it is always what they think I do. My professional foraging friends sometimes fall foul of similar intemperate reports.

It is actually quite hard to do a great deal of damage when foraging, with a certain amount of extra effort required to make a good job of it. Stripping all 400 square kilometres of New Forest fungi without the help of a B-52 bomber is really quite an enterprise, and it is tricky to find anything worth damaging when picking Blackberries, Nettles, Wild Garlic and most of the rest of the plants in this book. Leaving farm gates open (or closing them when they are open already!), trampling over flower-rich pasture or species-rich muddy estuary, uprooting entire plants when only a few leaves or flowers are needed and other forms of boorish behaviour will do some damage and should obviously be avoided, but not foraging itself.

The natural world suffers great damage at our hands, but not from careful foragers. For many years I collected sea beet from a particularly productive spot along the Dorset coast, carefully removing a leaf here and there. The area also sported wild gladioli, Alexanders, wild onion, rock samphire and many other plants, plus a charming, if worrying, population of adders. In 2018 I went to collect enough for tea, only to find that the whole area had been bulldozed to make way for an extensive lawn and a row of

deckchairs. I have endless stories like this, and I have little doubt that you do too.

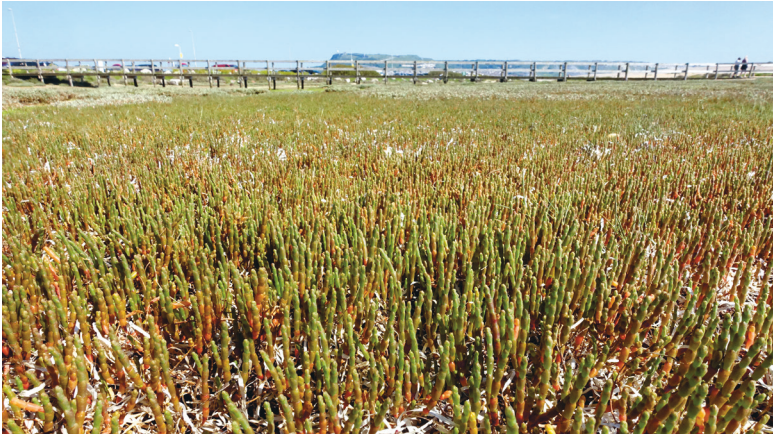
The careful forager behaves with good manners, taking only what he or she needs, leaving some for others and more than enough for the continuation of the species. The careful forager will also be choosy about what is collected, though no species in this country is so valuable that a fortune can be made from over-picking it.

Most plants in this book are, effectively, weeds, and no amount of picking them can do any damage. Some are invasive species, so the more you pick the better! No organism I recommend here is rare, though some will require more care and restraint, and a few are included only for interest and completeness.

Some consideration should always be given to whether a plant is annual, biennial or perennial. The last of these allow a certain amount of liberty for the foragers as they are long-established organisms. A crab apple, for example, needs only one seed out of the hundreds of thousands it will produce during its lifetime to grow successfully to maturity for the species to continue. Annuals need to produce offspring every year to survive. If you removed an entire population of annuals (marsh samphire, for example), there would be no seed for next year and there might not be a seed bank available.

Most fungi are perennial, in that they arise from a mycelial net that is permanently underground or within a woody substratum. A mycelium may last for a hundred years or more – some of them are 'visible' in the green rings of darker-coloured grass seen in old grassland. During that time it may produce several thousand mushrooms, each of which will produce billions of spores. We are now into the trillions of spores. Only a few of these need to germinate in order to produce a new, productive mycelium. Establishing a new 'colony' is difficult, and with long odds, but then there are a lot of spores.

Picking mushrooms, then, is a little like picking apples from a tree – you would need to collect a very great deal to risk affecting the viability of a species in any particular area. The difference



Perennial Samphire

between spores and seeds is that the former are haploid, containing only half of the genetic material needed for reproduction. This means that more than one spore must germinate in the same place for reproduction to occur, but orders of magnitude more spores are produced than seeds.

This argument is borne out by the inadvertent experiment carried out in continental Europe over the last couple of thousand years. Picking wild mushrooms has always been a part of life, indeed a way of life, in continental countries, with everyone having their favourite spot. Family outings for mushrooms, festivals, markets, exports and so on are common. Mushrooms have been picked on an industrial scale for a very long time, but they still grow. If you buy wild mushrooms from the market or supermarket, they will have been picked by hand somewhere, probably in continental Europe.

While it is unlikely that you would do any harm by picking every Penny Bun you come across, there are still reasons to stay your hand. Other people like to see wild mushrooms as part of the country scene, and woodland stripped bare of mushrooms looks forlorn. Then there are the many species of invertebrates that live entirely on mushrooms. The chief of these are the fungal gnats, but there are many others, each with its own, sometimes baroque,

lifestyle. Usually they come in the form of the maggots we so hate, but they are life and deserve their chance. Removing every Penny Bun from the forest may leave many invertebrate species with nothing to eat for a year, and the local population will die out. If it is an isolated wood, it may be a long time before any lost species are replaced.

There is particular foraging sin about which I have strong opinions. I was driving along a country road through a nice piece of Dorset woodland about seven years ago and spotted about thirty boletes (mushrooms with tubes, not gills, the leaf-like structures below the cap). They had yellow stems and were growing on the verge. They looked beautiful, but I did not have time to stop to identify them precisely. When I returned the next day, every one of them had gone, presumably picked by someone who thought they might be edible. My guess is that they were *Boletus radicans*, a fairly uncommon species and lovely to see in such number. They are too bitter to eat, so the fool who picked them would have thrown them on the compost heap.

I call this sort of thing 'speculative picking', and it can apply to fungi, plants and seaweeds. If you wish to eat something from the wild, learn about it first, possibly taking a single specimen home to identify, and do not pick any more than that on the off-chance.

If anyone ever questions your life of foraging, then point out that you take only what you need and that you leave wherever you collect your food almost exactly as you found it. The wild remains wild. Not everyone will be satisfied with this, so it is time to bring out the big guns and ask them what they eat. Nearly all the methods at our disposal for obtaining food will have an environmental cost. Even the virtuous organic loaf of wholemeal bread will have been grown in a place that was once wild – and could be wild again if we stopped eating wholemeal bread. The forager is a moral animal, so be proud of what you do.

THE LAW

First of all, the law in England and Wales is somewhat different from that which rules the people of Scotland. The chief difference is that in Scotland the ages-old understanding that there was a universal right to roam has been incorporated into law in the Land Reform (Scotland) Act 2003. This simply means that anyone may wander wherever they wish, provided they behave in a civilised fashion, and don't damage crops, frighten the animals or camp out on somebody's lawn. Scotland is very fortunate in this, or sensible, if you prefer. For those of us in England and Wales there is only a slight taste of such freedom.

This book deals with practicalities, for the most part, so if you simply need to know what the law is, skip straight to the summary on p. 27.

We are territorial creatures, and few things will raise voices and tempers as readily as a dispute over boundaries and access. There is a feeling within us that we should not be restricted as to where we can go – it is our countryside and the various landowners mere custodians. 'Private. Keep Out!', except in areas which clearly are private, is an incentive to riot and rebellion. We are citizens of a country and view restrictions on our movement within it as the restriction of a birthright. More than this, we are a biological species with the same expectations as other species to roam as freely as practicalities and inclination allow.

Along with the natural right to go where we want comes the right to forage. The type of 'right' here is a fundamental right, not one conferred by others, such as a right to free school meals. Indeed, there is an endemic view within most societies that foraging is a right conferred by a higher authority. We even see this belief codified in the three Abrahamic religions, the cultural basis of a very large proportion of the world's population. For these peoples

the right to forage beats most other rights hands down because it is conferred by the highest authority of all:

And God said, Behold, I have given you every herb bearing seed, which is upon the face of all the earth, and every tree, in which is the fruit of a tree yielding seed; to you it shall be for meat.

Genesis 1:29

My friend Virginia told me of her erstwhile neighbour Dick, who lived two villages away. This venerable farm worker was wandering around someone's field picking mushrooms when he heard a stern voice from behind him. 'Dick! What do you think you be doing stealing my mushrooms?' Dick's reply came from history and heart. 'They bain't be your mushrooms, they be God's.'

The right to forage is a natural right and one we must defend with vigour, for there are those who would take it away. In 2017 Bristol Council suggested that it would be a good idea to prevent anyone from picking anything in the city. The council received a hard time at the hands of our sometimes glorious fourth estate, which reported this as the 'Blackberry War', and they eventually withdrew the proposal. In 2016 the Forestry Commission, concerned by the level of mushroom-collecting in the New Forest, announced what certainly sounded like a ban on mushroom-picking and put up signs in the car parks to that effect. But people fought back, pointing out that it was a right under law and that confiscating picked mushrooms by the foresters might constitute theft. They now have advisory signs in the car parks asking nicely that people do not pick mushrooms but noting that it is not an offence to do so.

A component of the history of the British countryside is the slow withdrawal of such rights. From Saxon times and probably before there was the 'waste'. This was an area of land within a feudal manor and usually some distance from habitation. Everyone had access to it and could use it for rough grazing and foraging for wood and food. For over a thousand years this incorporation of common agriculture with common access to the provender of

the wild continued. But gradually it was replaced by inclosure, where all the land within a manor was parcelled up into private holdings. The waste almost invariably joined the rest of the land in private ownership. Now, the picking of mushrooms or blackberries requires going on to another's land – trespass.

Customary commons, footpaths, public access forest, national parks and right-to-roam land have kept an illusion of freedom of movement, but it is a poor thing indeed. So much of the countryside is closed to us, fiercely defended against intruders. If you have ever met a farmer, gamekeeper or landowner on to whose land you have strayed, you will know how aggressive they can become. A couple of years ago I crossed a stile on to a public footpath to take photographs of a field that showed signs of having been ancient ridge and furrow. Within ten minutes I was being harangued by an apoplectic landowner asking what I was doing. I told him, and he called me a liar and demanded to know what I was really up to. It transpired that he was selling the land for a massive housing development and had earned few friends among the locals. Even when satisfied at my innocent intent, he offered no apology for his intemperance.

I have quite a few stories like that – the consequences of one mild act of trespass, this time to photograph mushrooms, has rumbled on down the years. I have been lucky, I suppose, compared with others who have picked mushrooms or blackberries or bilberries in the past. Newspaper reports abound of people being hauled up in front of the magistrates for picking mushrooms, crab apples, seaweed and everything else. The collecting of bilberries and of seaweed have been the occasion of riot and affray in the nineteenth century, and I have come across three records (mercifully, still over a hundred years ago) of people being shot for picking mushrooms, two of whom were shot dead. The magistrates of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were often landowners and seldom took the side of the defendants, so the classic defence of 'The gun went off in me 'and, guvnor' was invariably accepted, and the dead or injured victim was considered to have only himself to blame.

I rather admire a Mr William Miller, who found himself in front of the bench in Croydon in 1911, charged with damaging a gorse bush while picking some blackberries. The chief prosecution witness was a gamekeeper – a noble tribe, though not known for their good humour or forgiving nature. Miller, after being reprimanded for standing in the dock with his hands in his pockets, said that he had a perfect right to gather a few blackberries and that it was a preposterous thing that a man should be brought into a police court for doing so. The magistrate convicted Miller of trespass and fined him 5s. or four days' hard labour. His wife offered to pay, but he would have none of it. Displaying a well-deserved contempt for the proceedings, he said, 'No fear, I'll do the four days.'

THE THEFT ACT

The hundreds of prosecutions for picking mushrooms that have taken place over the last couple of centuries bring to light one of the most fascinating and encouraging parts of English and Welsh law. Many of the farmers who brought an action claimed that the mushrooms concerned were 'cultivated', and they would point to the various notices they had erected and a pile of manure to prove their point. However, the mushrooms would most certainly have been wild, as Field Mushrooms are impossible to cultivate (the cultivated mushroom is a different species). By stating that they were cultivated, the farmer was attempting to circumvent the law (still in force), which states that plants and fungi growing wild belong to no one and thus cannot be stolen. Again, they almost invariably won a conviction, despite this obvious subterfuge.

However, a clarification, which in turn set a new precedent, was made in Hove in 1887, in yet another case of a landowner taking exception to someone picking mushrooms from his land. The accused was a Master Mansbridge, who had gathered 2s. worth of mushrooms from a field owned by a Mr Gardner. Accusations of removal of 'herbage' and damaging a fence were quickly withdrawn, leaving only the picking of mushrooms to be considered. Mr Gardner explained that he earned £6 or £7 from the mushrooms