



Wombat Forestcare Newsletter

As we transition from late summer into autumn, with the cooler temperatures, our migratory birds will travel north. Powerful Owls will be calling and mating. Autumn orchids are beginning to appear. Fungi will start to emerge. Autumn is a perfect time for forest walks.

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Scenting the Wombat

Words and images by Alison Pouliot

Under a heavy sky we headed into the Wombat. My nose twitched with the alchemical blending of scents that precede a summer storm: ozone, dust and something less definable. Then came the rain, enlivening the Wombat and releasing a cavalcade of forest fragrances – damp earth, aromatic leaf litter, tang of bat, heady eucalypt and the funk of the first autumn fungi.

We skirted the ridge and dropped down to Nolan's Creek. On a fallen trunk, the umbrellas of Yellow-Stemmed Mycenae (*Mycena epipterygia*) poked through the moss. We paused to investigate. 'What do they smell like?' I asked my friend. He then did something rather odd. To my surprise, he opened his field guide, found the page and read the description. 'Cucumber-like', he replied. I was a tad perplexed. It seemed like a bizarre choice to rely on something someone else had written (having presumably smelt it) rather than use the amazing sensory organ wedged between our eyes. A strangely sense-less approach. How is the Wombat perceived in all its sensory wonder if not directly via the senses?

Sense of smell is overshadowed by sight, the dominant sense for most people. Even with sight, seeing takes practice – developing a search image, fine-scaling, observing tracks and traces. It takes a long time looking until we see. While the forest is commonly navigated by sight, it can also be experienced by its olfactory cues. Smell unlocks memory and sensory knowledge. To smell is to attune to both the sensation of the scent plus the associated emotions it triggers. In the *Perfumier and the Stinkhorn*, naturalist Richard Mabey notes that smell inhabits an evocative, ephemeral space in our imaginations, citing Marcel Proust who considered the 'vast structure of recollection' to be caught in scent. Our brains are outgrowths of our noses, says Mabey



The Yellow-Stemmed Mycena (*Mycena epipterygia* group) smells like freshly cut cucumber. Photography © Alison Pouliot

and hence it is unsurprising that smell is so evocative in triggering memory.

Sniffing out the Wombat's fungi means making smell deliberate rather than accidental. It requires a fine-tuned nose (to mix sensory metaphors). It is not so much about randomly sniffing, but deliberately smelling, seeking out smells with the knowledge of a range of possibilities, while remaining open to surprise. Among the mixed

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Several native *Amanita* species smell like rancid flour and some smell like squashed ants. Photography © Alison Pouliot

palette of fungal fragrances are those that resemble a suite of different plants. The bracket fungus, Curry Punk (*Piptoporus australiensis*) smells like curry. Many smell mealy (like flour) such as the Grey Jockey (*Asterophora mirabilis*) and several *Amanita* species. Some mimic rotting flesh. There are those with a distinctively chemical edge, such as the Yellow Stainer (*Agaricus xanthodermus*) described as being like iodine, phenol or dentists' waiting rooms. Others are unexpectedly aromatic, reminiscent of bubblegum or grandma's rancid perfume. The Fairy Ring Champignon (*Marasmius oreades*) can faintly resemble garlic, bitter almond or freshly cut hay. Perhaps it depends on what it ate for dinner the night before. Those with olfactory super-sensitivity might detect the artichoke smell of Gold Tufts (*Cyptotrama asparatum*). The Wood Blewit (*Lepista nuda*) has an aromatic almost floral smell. Despite its lethality, my experience of the infamous Death Cap (*Amanita phalloides*) is that it smells pleasantly aromatic and not remotely 'cadaverous and unbearable' as described by French botanist, Pierre Buillard in 1780.

However, it goes to show that smell is not just subjective, but also changes over the lifetime of a fungus. The Slimy Green Waxcap (*Hygrocybe graminicolor*) has never passed my nostrils but apparently smells like burnt grass. Many fungus scents are hard to pin down, reflecting our deficient olfactory lexicon.

Fungal aromas did not evolve purely for the olfactory amusement of *Homo sapiens*. Truffles often confound those trying to describe their peculiar aromas. Among the more endearing allegorical references to truffle smells that I've heard are: 'university student socks', 'an old wet labrador' and 'train stations'. In fact, the smell of truffles often resembles pheromones, or sex hormones, as a clever means of trickery to encourage a mammal to unearth it, gulp it down and bounce off elsewhere to deposit its spores. Over forty Australian mammals consume hypogeous (underground) fungi and most if not all rely on smell to detect them. The Wombat offers not just amazing things to see, but also the chance to delight in new and interesting aromas.

If you're interested in a sensory fungal discovery of the Wombat this autumn come along and join a foray. ■

Further information: www.alisonpouliot.com

A few interesting books worth sniffing out:

Diane Ackerman, *A Natural History of the Senses* (New York: Vintage Books, 1995).

Paul Moore, *The Hidden Power of Smell* (New York: Springer, 2015).

Constance Classen et al., *Aroma: The Cultural History of Smell* (New York: Routledge, 1994).

Patrick Suskind, *Perfume: The Story of a Murderer* (Camberwell: Hamish Hamilton, 2002).



The Curry Punk (*Piptoporus australiensis*) smells like curry. Photography © Alison Pouliot