

BMS Group Leaders' Meeting 2022

Nathan Smith, BMS Recording Network Co-ordinator, reports on the much-awaited Group Leaders Meeting arranged by the BMS for local fungus groups, which took place in June 2022.

After a four-year gap, the Group Leaders' Meeting (GLM) finally returned. Held at Northern College, Barnsley, the two-day event was attended by representatives of local fungus groups from across the UK. A selection of speakers gave talks on a range of topics, including some impromptu, interspersed by some open discussion sessions and a practical demonstration. Despite intermittent loss of internet connections and a closed bar it was ultimately successful, reigniting the warm and convivial atmosphere it is known for.

The meeting opened on the first evening with a meal and Fungal Pub Quiz. Whilst the bar had been closed in the interim since the last GLM, mycologists are a resourceful bunch and bottles of beer, wine and other beverages of choice quickly emerged from suitcases and backpacks. With attendees divided into equal, random teams, the dinner and quiz provided an opportunity for long-overdue catch-ups and updates.

Saturday morning began with an excellent warm-up: everyone was tasked with identifying key facts about fellow attendees. We searched around for someone born in the southern hemisphere, or someone who had forgotten a toiletry item. Many also searched in vain for a Manchester United supporter. Warmed-up and appropriately mingled, the sessions kicked-off with a presentation, by Norfolk's Tony Leech, about getting involved with coprophilous fungi (catchily-named the 'Dungy Fungi'). Far from a dirty business, Tony made a compelling case for their further study, particularly for the microscopically inclined, and provided a list of recommended resources for those inspired to have a go. There is, apparently, good work to be found in the faeces of carnivores if one can withstand the smell.

Following Tony was Renee Watson (Oxfordshire) who presented a detailed account of how she got her local area involved in mycology via savvy use of social media. This was inspiring to all, with many attendees commenting on her passion for the subject, and was all the more impressive given that - being unable to attend in person - she gave the presentation online, from her (parked!) car.

Next was Rich Wright, presently in Cardiff, who gave a pre-recorded talk on his Oak Tree Fungus Survey. An aspect of his PhD work, the talk was watched intently by all and the work is likely to have an excellent impact on our understanding of a lesser-studied aspect of fungal ecology. Rich showcased the app that he has developed to support the project - an exciting way forward for the mass engagement of people in fungal research.

Next was the exceptional Cameron Diekonigin (Edinburgh & Lothians) who gave a presentation on the production of oversized fungi models using paper mâché clay. Highlighting their origin and importance as outreach tools, he then went through the step-by-step production process. All the while, a number of eye-catching examples were displayed on the table, including a rather special *Clathrus ruber* made especially for the meeting. Cameron also produced a written guide for those tempted to give it a try for future outreach events.

The next session was a discussion on fungal names, led by Brian Douglas (mycologist, Kew). Brian explained that, for a number of years, the late Richard Shotbolt handled addition of new fungal names and combinations to the UK Species Inventory and BMS Names List, and synchronised the BMS/FRDBI names list with the UK Species Inventory. A system for adding and updating names is now in place however a strategy that balances the needs of field mycologists with the need for 'cutting edge' fungal names is required. Brian explained that this is becoming an increasing issue, exemplified by European resources, such as the *Fungi of Temperate Europe*, using more up-to-date names than the UK Species Inventory. On another thread, there was general agreement from attendees that common names of fungi should be capitalised when written.

The next talk, on fungal rewilding, was given by David Satori (Rewilding Mycology). Rewilding is an approach to conservation often applied to charismatic mammals and apex predators however David gave a compelling case for the role of fungi in rewilding - and the role of rewilding in fungal conservation. It was a thoroughly excellent talk that raised several questions and left many excited to see the outcomes of David's work.

Alyona Biketova, the Fungal DNA Curator at Kew, offered an international perspective on citizen science and amateur mycology. Detailing her interactions with mycological societies old and new throughout her career, Alyona helped remind us that ours is a global pursuit executed at a local level. Some eagle-eyed attendees even spotted themselves in the photos, pushing this point home still further.

Eric Janke (Hampshire) presented his experiences of DNA barcoding using the BentoLabs. Due to the work of a number of individuals, particularly David Harries and Brian Douglas, DNA barcoding has become an activity increasingly adopted by recording groups. Eric has approached the work with vigour during the pandemic lockdown period and gave an excellent presentation on his experiences, the problems he faced and the solutions. With any luck, others were inspired to have a go.

Eric was followed by Tuula Niskanen (Fungal Diversity and Systematics, Kew) who updated attendees on the mycological work of the institution and how field mycologists could get involved. Mycology appears to have increased in priority at Kew, which can only be good news; the organisation appears increasingly receptive to working with the BMS and with field mycologists. A fantastic talk which prompted many questions, it was unfortunately cut short by a power cut which ended the online call!

Brian Douglas stepped up again to give a detailed exploration of two of Kew's current projects, Darwin Tree of Life (DToL) and Fungal Tree of Life (FToL). Both projects aim to increase the genetic information known about fungi, with DToL aiming to sequence the genomes of all ~70,000 species of eukaryotic organisms in Britain and Ireland and FToL aiming to generate DNA barcodes for all fungal genera. Both projects have substantial potential for field mycologist involvement and Brian promised further updates in the near future. This was followed by a practical session led by Brian and Eric Janke, demonstrating DNA extraction and providing opportunity for those attending to ask questions on any and all aspects of the process.

The evening session commenced with an excellent oral history of the Warwickshire Fungus Survey and Birmingham Natural History Society and those involved, by Dinah Griffin. Supplemented by an array of archival documents it was somewhat of a cautionary tale, detailing the eventual disbandment of both groups. The talk, however, finished on a positive note as Dinah explained how some of the remaining members had re-joined as a more casual group called the Friends of Warwickshire Fungi.

From here, Cameron once again took the stage to give highlights from his visit to Croatia with Roy Watling, particularly the Mushroom Museum at Zagreb. It was very much an entertaining and enlightening talk which will no doubt have inspired some attendees to plan their next holiday to Croatia. The dancing at the inter-group meeting, along with the matching T-Shirts for each fungal group are ideas perhaps worthy of import to the UK, though I will leave this for each group to decide!

The evening ended with an impromptu talk by Tony Leech who, having revealed that a letter of his correcting authors on the mis-representation of a deathly poisonous mushroom that had been published in a national newspaper, presented his story, along with the initial fungus image the paper had included. A respectful presentation describing the issues with talking about such recent cases of poisoning and the responsibilities of using accurate photographs, the evening ended with mycologists poring over the incorrectly-published photo and offering tentative suggestions for ID.

The final morning of the meeting began with an update from Stuart Skeates on the Fungal Records Database of Britain and Ireland (FRDBI), detailing new features - most prominently the Elastic Search function - and potential avenues for development. Stuart's hard work has seen the FRDBI become the envy of other natural history societies, both home and abroad, and all attendees appreciated the update.

Carol Hobart (FMC Committee member and Training Manager) gave a presentation on BMS mycology training. Carol outlined the courses and events currently offered and discussed other types of training that might be provided in future. An authoritative talk, she highlighted much of the wonderful work being done by local groups, recognising them as the first point of contact for many newcomers on their mycological journey. There is much the BMS can do to work with local groups so as to not duplicate their efforts and Carol set out a fantastic blueprint for the next stages.

The final talk by Emma Thompson (BMS) and Marcus Yeo (Chair, BMS Field Mycology & Conservation Committee) outlined the BMS Strategy 2022–2025 and its implications for local recording groups. Long in waiting, the emergence

of the BMS Strategy has helped to focus the BMS's activities and it is hoped that it will enable the BMS to better support and uplift the local fungus groups. The event concluded with an open discussion that identified key areas of importance to fungus groups and explored how the BMS could work together with the groups.

As a final note, I would like to thank all those who spoke and attended the GLM. Such events can be tricky to organise, particularly in uncertain post-COVID times, but the event flew by in the most wonderful of ways. The topics were all presented artfully by their respective speakers, capturing a wide range of the work happening across the UK, and prompted much thoughtful conversation and debate. Additionally, my thanks go to the staff at Northern College, who went above and beyond to support our meeting. I personally left mycologically-renewed and hope others felt the same. I am already looking forward to 2024!