

## Fungi in our Park

Once you start looking at the different forms that fungi come in, it's hard to stop. In fact, there are many people who go into East Harbour Regional Park simply to find as many different species and forms as possible and they are rarely disappointed. Fungi are the second most prolific life form on the planet after animals, with plants coming in third place.

Fungi are almost everywhere we look, but some are so small they remain unseen. With the use of DNA analysis, it has been estimated that we probably only know 5–10% of existing varieties of fungi globally and most likely a much lower proportion in NZ. For this reason, it is very unwise to eat fungi unless you are really sure of what you're doing.

Our forest doesn't boast an enormous variety of colour until you start seeing fungi. While most of us have seen the white basket fungus with its characteristic lattice structure, there are a multitude of naturally occurring blues, yellows and reds and the forms they take can be anything from crystal-like to huge edible puffballs. There are fungi that glow in the dark, Stink Horn fungi produce smells of rotting flesh to attract flies, and there are fungi that even consume insects alive; in fact, Māori used these insects in the ink they tattooed with. We even have a fungus on our \$50 bank note (the bright blue werewere-kōkako).



**Fungi in our Park. Credits: top Sally Bain, bottom Eric Burger**

Fungi like the rain so we have had a cracker winter for fungi foragers. Fungi have symbiotic relationships with almost all plants, including our beech trees and native orchids. Fungi need a healthy environment to thrive and, like our birds, insects and plants, have evolved to live in unison with the lifeforms around them. Some of the rarest fungi in NZ would have evolved with a need to be eaten by the various life forms that were once common in NZ, so without these life forms the fungi are struggling to survive, as are the very animals they require for distribution of spores.

Māori used fungi for many reasons but many of those uses have been lost and forgotten over time. There is now a movement to re-establish that knowledge. Fungi are important to our everyday modern lives in many ways, not least of all for making wine, beer, bread and even Marmite—all these exist because of fungi.

For identification, the best tool is an app called iNaturalist, which you can download on to your phone. This is an extremely useful app and your observations will be open to being confirmed or discussed amongst those with more expert knowledge.

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