

THE FASCINATING AND WEIRD WORLD OF FUNGI



If you like weird stuff, I suggest you consider fungi:

- A fungus is alive, but it is not a plant or an animal. It is a member of the Fungus Kingdom, along with yeasts, moulds, mildews, rusts, smuts and other strange organisms.
- There may be over 1.5 million species of fungus worldwide, and over 10,000 in Australia. This is 6 times the number of flowering plants!
- Together, they make up 25% of the total biomass of the planet! Good grief!
- 80% of plants need fungi for healthy growth. All orchids must have fungi to grow at all.
- Highly desired truffles are fungi.

When you dig in the garden, you often see fine white threads in the soil. These are mycorrhizal fungi that form symbiotic relationships with the roots of plants. They help provide nutrients, water absorption and



disease resistance to the plant. In return, the fungus gets carbohydrates from the plant's photosynthesis. In this area, Hawkesbury sandstone soils are low in nutrients, particularly phosphorus. Most native plants develop cunning ways of growing successfully. Plants in the Proteaceae family (Banksias, Grevilleas, Hakeas etc.) rely on fungi to supply the phosphorus they need to grow. Native orchids depend entirely on fungi to germinate and grow. Perhaps at some future time, each plant sold will come with a small bag of soil containing the correct fungi.

Toadstools and mushrooms are the fruiting bodies of their much larger underground fungi, like a flower is to a plant. They give off spores that eventually form new fungi.

Decomposer fungi feed on dead plant matter, breaking it down into soil and recycling the nutrients. There are no waste products in nature – something our throw-away society needs to learn about and copy.

The study of fungi is called mycology and those who do it are mycologists. There is a fascinating world of citizen science out there, waiting for your attention. One active group is the Australian Fungimap iNaturalist community. There are several other groups.

If you want to know more about fungi, don't talk to the local Landcare group (www.StillCreekLandcare.com.au) because we won't know much more than you. However, we do appreciate the complex fungi-related activity going on silently beneath our feet. It seems that whatever piece of the natural world we choose to notice, we find a new world of complexity and learning. And that makes us want to care for what is there. Ain't life grand?

- BY BARRY LEES

Hidden in the Hills SYDNEY WILDLIFE CARERS

It is more than likely that when driving along roads in and around the Sydney Hills District that you may have seen an animal on the side of the road that has been hit and possibly killed by a motor vehicle.

It is also likely that you may not be aware of a group of dedicated wildlife carers who are called out to render assistance to these animals, as in some instances they may still be alive. In many cases, the wallaby, possum or wombat may be a female carrying a joey. Frequently, the joey survives the impact that results whilst in its mother pouch.

These are selfless people who will come to the rescue of our native wildlife and wherever possible will look after any orphaned



young, nurturing them until they are old enough to fend for themselves before returning them back into the bushland nearby to where the rescue took place.

One such group operating in the Hills area is called "Sydney Wildlife" who will answer their phone number **9413 4300** any time of the day in order to attend to any animal or bird that may be injured in some way. These compassionate people perform their caring task, usually in their own home and frequently at their own expense.

Sydney Wildlife can also assist with advice on how local residents are able to provide habitat protection for many native creatures, including reptiles, echidnas, possums and birds, that may venture into residential backyards, and need protection from prowling predators such as cats, dogs and foxes.

- BY LACHLAN TURNER