

Book reviews

Planet Fungi

Catherine Marciniak, Stephen Axford & Tom May

CSIRO Publishing, March 2025

ISBN: 978-1-83699133-5

Hardback 280 x 240 mm, 310 pp.

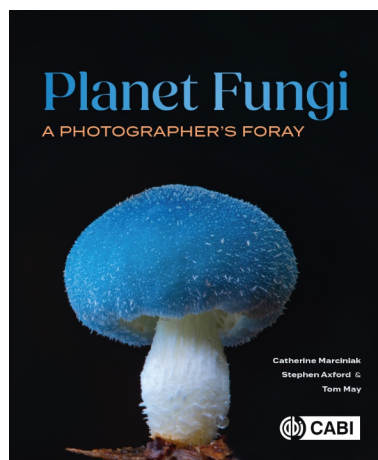
£35 from CABI Books and other booksellers

This is simply the ultimate in fungal coffee table books. This isn't meant in any way disparagingly. It comes at a very reasonable price complete with the one indispensable attribute needed these days by any fungi book aimed at a wide readership: an endorsement from Merlin Sheldrake. He writes: "A stunning exploration of a hidden world. These are among the most remarkable images of fungi I've ever seen." I can only agree.

The spectacular species on the front cover is in a well known genus, but you won't guess which! Answer revealed below. There is also a subtitle 'A photographer's foray'. The photographer, Stephen Axford, and his two co-authors are all Australian. The book reflects his spectacular use of the stacking techniques now available with digital cameras (as discussed by Jens Petersen in the last issue of FM). By happy chance he developed his expertise coincident with his 'discovery' that fungi provide a beautiful and inexhaustible range of suitable subject matter. The combination rapidly became a highly productive obsession taking over and renewing his life.

The first author is Axford's partner, a documentary film maker and journalist who provides the text. The third is Tom May, a distinguished professional mycologist, e.g. co-author of the latest 'Madrid' edition of the Code of Nomenclature. Help is acknowledged from a dozen other mycologists, but presumably it was May who had the last word in ensuring that the known species were as far as possible correctly named, and the numerous unknowns admitted to be unknown.

Those same stacking techniques that give depth of focus to a single photo also form the basis of time lapse photography. Some of Axford's sequences were used in Attenborough's Planet Earth II, echoed here in the title Planet Fungi. This in turn opened the door to invitations to join fungal expeditions to exotic places, thus leading to chapters on some very poorly forayed regions such



as the Eastern Himalayas, where 232 species were photographed in four weeks, with 34 proving new to science. Accounts of several such expeditions are interspersed with chapters focussing on subject areas rather than regions, e.g. one on lichens (including unexpected detail revealed under UV light) and one on luminous fungi. This reader is left feeling that our western European fungi, here ignored, are in general far less dramatic than those to be found in abundance almost anywhere else on earth!

A chapter on 'New Discoveries' is largely taken up with Axford's one favourite species among all the many novelties now named and the many more as yet unnamed. This is the one on the cover, found in one of the few remaining areas of tropical forest on Australia's East coast, and immediately felt to be something different when first seen. On the cover it is greatly magnified (about $\times 7$ I would guess, judging by a picture elsewhere in the book of Axford photographing it). But you still wouldn't guess that DNA analysis has found it to be a strange *Coprinopsis*. Being beautiful and blue, Latin scholars shouldn't be surprised to learn that it has been named *C. pulchricaeerulea*. It presents as little blue blobs, with the stem usually entirely concealed by the in-rolled cap. Surprisingly a previous unnamed fungarium specimen was located, collected on the tiny World Heritage Site of Lord Howe Island, 700 km North East of Sidney. The authors felt compelled to visit. They duly found it still present there but also another surprise: a fungus which DNA showed to be this same species in a bright scarlet colour form as yet known nowhere else. The blue form is now also known in New Caledonia.

The final chapter is built round the slogan 'Fauna, Flora and Funga' bemoaning that the Funga still come a very poor third in this trio. The familiar gulf is cited between the 150,000 described species and the estimated undescribed millions. Moreover only 10% of those 150,000 have had any DNA sequencing. Also less than 1% of all Red List evaluations carried out to date have been of fungal species. On a more upbeat note we read that 20,000 new fungal species have been described in the last five years.

I find it impossible to leaf idly through the pages of this book and not feel overwhelmed by the sheer diversity and beauty that our planet has to offer to those who seek it out.

Alick Henrici

Reference

Petersen, J.H. (2025). Going macro, *Lachnella alboviolascens*. *Field Mycol.* 26(2): 64–65.

A Brush with Fungi

David Mitchell

Privately published, July 2025

ISBN: 9781036910440

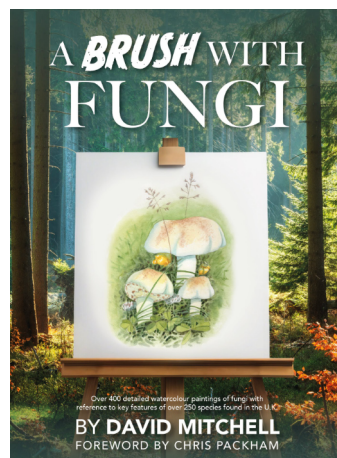
Hardback, A4, 440 pp.

£69 from Summerfield Books

There is a long tradition of artists and naturalists creating collections of fungi paintings in Britain, going back to James Bolton in the 18th century with its heyday in the Victorian period with people like Mary Frances Lewis of Ludlowⁱ and Beatrix Potter. The closest recent parallel is 'In Praise of Toadstools' by Suzanne Lucas, a two-volume collection of fungi paintings published in 1997. That there here have not been many examples of similar works since is a testament to what a difficult, expensive and time-consuming process this must be.

The latest addition to this genre is 'A Brush with Fungi' a substantial book, very well produced with excellent print quality, that accurately reproduces the watercolour paintings.

There are around 250 species represented. These are arranged in genera, starting with the milkcaps, boletes and brittlegills ending with what is described as a mixed selection of species including *Ascomycota*, microfungi and slime moulds. These are mostly common species that it



would not be too surprising to encounter on a typical foray in the right habitat. The exception is *Lactarius ligniotus* which was the first record of this species in Britain and the story of this discovery is given a special section at the end.

Most species have between one and three full pages dedicated to them with a mixture of paintings of the same specimen including cross sections and views of the cap, gills and specimens at different stages of growth. Many fungi can vary dramatically over time, so this is particularly nice to see. Sometimes there is also a painting of the species in its habitat. Each painting is accompanied by notes highlighting key features or adding details of invisible characteristics. These are all based on the author's own observations. The identification of the species in the paintings seems to be accurate, and I haven't spotted any errors.

This is clearly the result of a lot of work by the author who has a deep fascination for fungi and an appreciation of their beauty. It is a beautiful exploration of fungi of these islands that will particularly appeal to anyone who appreciates fungal illustrations.

Lukas Large

ⁱ Mary Frances Lewis was author of 'Fungi collected in Shropshire and other neighborhoods', a collection of original fungal illustrations produced between 1860–1902. Available to view online via the Biodiversity Heritage Library (<https://www.biodiversitylibrary.org/bibliography/171551>) and published in a printed volume by Chronicle Books (2023), with a foreword from mycologist Dr. Patricia Ononiuw Kaishian.