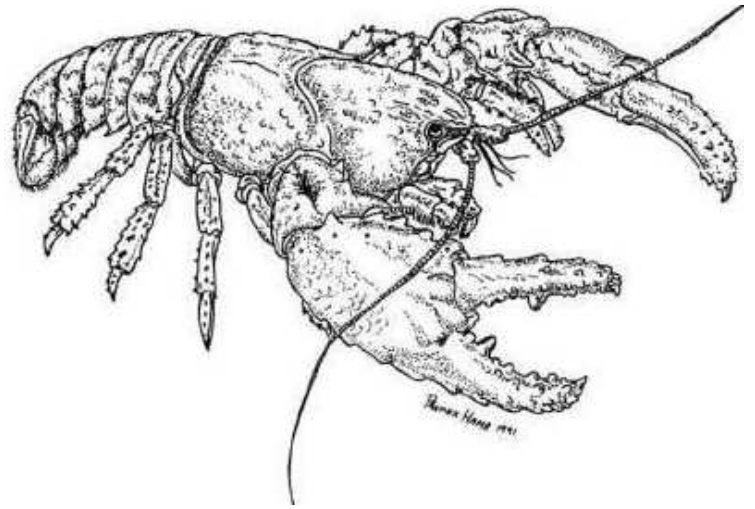


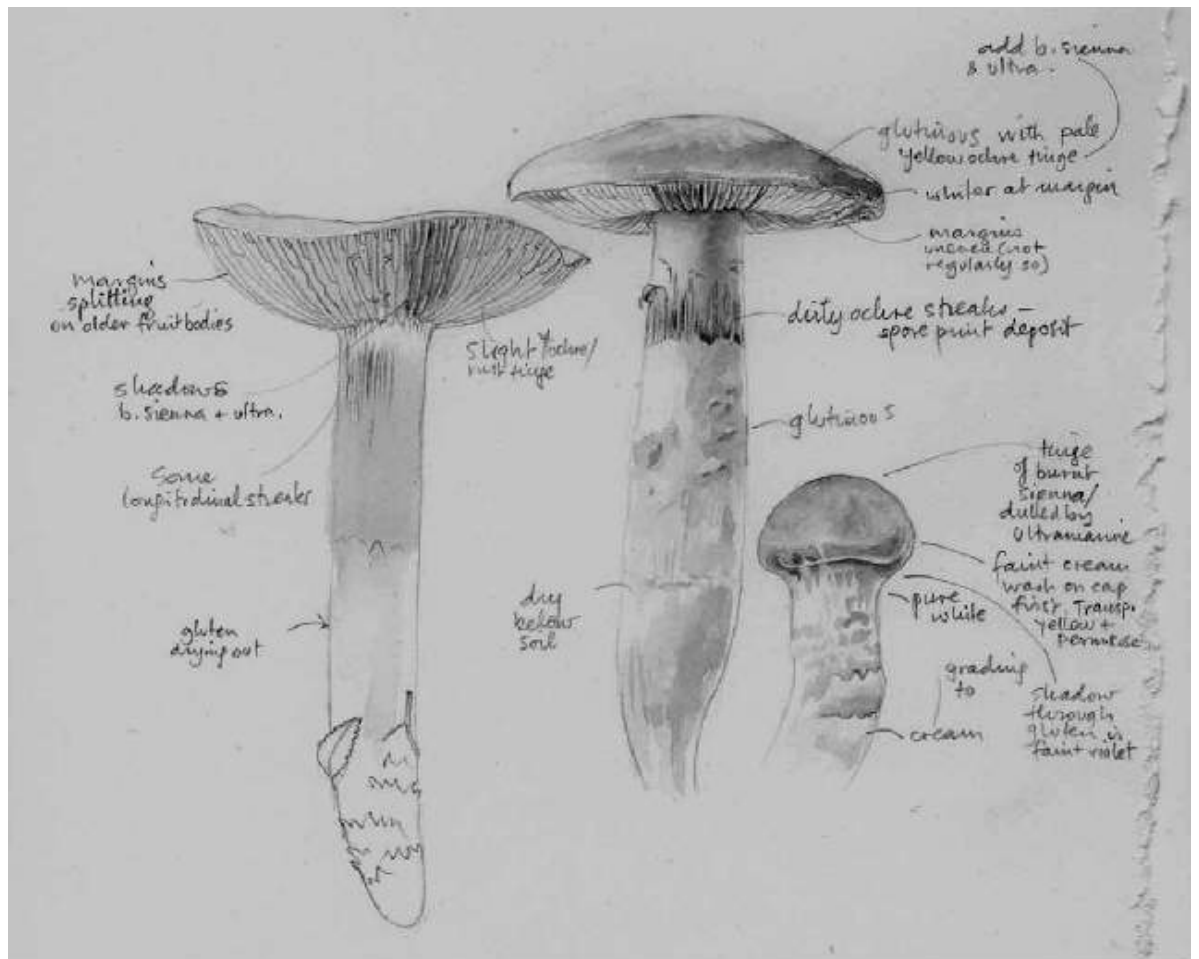
Disjunct Naturalists

WEBSITE OF THE CENTRAL NORTH FIELD NATURALISTS



Mycologists in Paradise

by Sarah Lloyd



Katrina Syme's field sketch of a *Cortinarius* sp.

It's late autumn (2006) and most of the summer migrants: the Striated Pardalotes, Dusky Woodswallows, Black-faced Cuckoo-shrikes and Swift Parrots, have either left the state or are restlessly flocking, preparing to return to the Australian mainland where they can be assured of a more reliable winter food supply than here in Tasmania. Migratory shorebirds, some already donning their spectacular brick red breeding plumage, are also heading north, traversing the globe to return to their breeding grounds in Siberia, Mongolia, Alaska or northern China.

This mass departure of birds sees a corresponding exodus of bird watchers. Many of my ornithological colleagues are studying maps, checking forecasts and booking flights to far north Queensland or more distant countries; places much richer in feathered delights than in bird poor, chilly Tasmania.

But for naturalists with an interest in cryptogams there's reason enough to stay. The autumn rains begin to saturate logs, branches and the forest floor and their green covering of mosses and liverworts glisten as they rehydrate after the desiccating warmth of summer. Crisped wafers of foliose lichens soften, filmy ferns but one cell thick revive and an amazing profusion of fungal fruits starts appearing on just about every surface.

For me this year was especially exciting as I went with a group of mycologists to the rainforests of northwest Tasmania to record, collect and photograph the stunning diversity of fungal species in the ancient myrtle beech forests of the Tarkine.

The group was small, ten people in all. It included Greg Mueller and Betty Strack, mycologists from the Chicago Field Museum who have studied fungi in the *Nothofagus* forests in South America and more recently in the eastern highlands of Papua New Guinea; Tom May and Teresa Lebel from the Royal Botanic Gardens (RBG), Melbourne; botanical/fungal artist, Katrina Syme, from Western Australia; Pam Catcheside a botanist/mycologist from South Australia and husband, David, and Graham Patterson, who works assiduously as a Fungimap volunteer. I joined the team because I'm on the committee of Fungimap Inc. and as local residents, Ron, my partner and I acted as guides and interpreters of the endemic flora. Jason Edwards, a freelance nature photographer with Australian Geographic, was also with us for most of the week.

Considerable pre-planning is needed for an expedition that includes international and interstate participants and the unpredictable and ephemeral nature of the appearance of fungi makes it particularly difficult to anticipate the best time for such a trip. However, as there had been a proliferation of fungi in the Tarkine in late April last year, we decided to begin this year's excursion at approximately the same time. On April 18th we headed for the Bischoff Hotel at Waratah, our headquarters for the week.

The first day was devoted to a Fungimap meeting, a necessary though time-consuming exercise when committee members were observed gazing longingly out the window at the mist-covered slopes of the nearby forested gully. We were all keen to get into the field and at 9.00 the next morning were clothed in wet weather gear and descending the steep slope into the Magnet valley, not far west of Waratah.

Because all the collected specimens would need to be described, photographed, documented (as per permit from local authorities), in some cases painted and later dried before being lodged in various herbaria, collecting protocols and a strict numbering system were clearly enunciated. We were also mindful of the need to restrict the collections as the preparation of fresh specimens would more than occupy each evening back at the pub. We broke into small groups of three or four people, each group included a scribe, photographer and someone proficient in fungal identification. Tom, Graham, Ron and I negotiated the shallow but swiftly flowing waters of a pristine section of Magnet creek while the rest of the group headed downstream. Here past mining activity had denuded the vegetation which is yet to fully recover even though the mine has been closed for over half a century.

The following day we returned to the track to Philosopher Falls, the area that had caused so much excitement the previous year. Here the callidendrous ('beautiful trees') rainforest has an open park-like appearance. With no

eucalypts in sight, giant myrtle beech and sassafras form a light-excluding canopy and, apart from the tall treeferns (*Dicksonia antarctica*) which grow in profusion, the ground is almost devoid of other vascular plants. Instead the floral diversity is evident in the stunning array of mosses, liverworts and lichens that clothe the logs, exposed roots, trunks, branches and soil.

The sweet, slightly musty odour of decaying vegetation was all pervasive, but the distinctive smells of some of the fungal fruits had us all sniffing, trying to recall. Those with a keen nose detected the watermelon fragrance of the bright red brackets *Tyromyces pulcherrimus* on the myrtle beech, the fresh cucumber smell of the slimy yellowish *mycenas*, the apricot aroma of the *Cantharellus* and a deliciously garlic scent emanating from minute *marasmius*. Those with a lesser sense simply shrugged their shoulders and said 'mushroom', no doubt somewhat pleased they were unable to detect the stench of wet nappies, ammonia and even public toilets that made the rest of us wish we'd not inhaled so deeply.

With all attention focussed on the ground and freezing rain and icy cold fingers making for less than perfect collecting conditions it was easy to forget momentarily that we were in one of the most beautiful forests imaginable. Before long the quiet concentration was interrupted by the sharp 'tick' of a Pink Robin and the fluty songs of Green Rosellas and gave us cause to look around and wonder at our surroundings. Bryophytes festooned the canopy branches, hailstones hung like jewels suspended in filigree cobwebs and, now and again when blue sky appeared, shafts of sunlight would penetrate the forest and light the clustered fruits of ruby coloured mushrooms; too tempting for any photographer or artist to ignore.

As we moved further into the forest we found leathery shelf fungi, delicate corals, brain-like jellies, brackets, truffles, discs and cups and a profusion of mushrooms in every conceivable colour. In a single afternoon we listed more than 140 different species and collected many specimens that await further examination and are undoubtedly new to science.

A nondescript putty-coloured truffle lying on the soil surface turned out to be one of the most exciting finds and back at the pub we took turns to peer down the microscope at its pink angular spores. This feature immediately identified it as a *Richoniella* sp. a member of that charismatic family, Entoloma. This species of *Richoniella* and a multicoloured wax cap *Hygrocybe arcohastata* were both recorded for the first time in Tasmania.

On Saturday we drove to Hellyer Gorge for a fungi foray where we met local contributors to the fungi mapping scheme and members of regional field naturalists and resource management groups. They had driven from the sunny north into the persistent wetness typical of the west coast and had a taste of the conditions we had been and would continue to experience during our time in the Tarkine; conditions that make the area so wonderfully rich in fungi. While driving back from Hellyer Gorge we discussed the possibility of foregoing another cold, wet foray and returning to the pub for a coffee and the warmth of a blazing fire. However, being ever mindful of the unique opportunity to spend only a few more days in the field together, we resisted the temptation and instead started searching for a patch of forest different from those thus far explored.

The vista from a highpoint on the highway west of Waratah gives a sense of the topography and the vegetation mosaic that characterises the Tarkine. Extensive buttongrass moorlands are interspersed with patches of forest. On hills and exposed slopes these forests are predominantly of eucalypt species, while Myrtle Beech and other rainforest trees flourish in the sheltered gullies and wetter areas. When not shrouded in clouds or swirling mists distant mountains frame the spectacular scenery.

The bitumen highway is crisscrossed by powerlines, and heavy duty transmission towers march across the landscape to the mines that scar this richly mineralised part of the state. From this semi-industrialised place we took a short walk into yet another magical forest and soon forgot the rain, cold and discomfort and began to explore. Tall straight tea tree (*Leptospermum* sp.) dripping with bryophytes with spindly emergent eucalypts poking through their canopy again created conditions devoid of ground layer vegetation. We scratched around and unearthed several truffle species and added more names to the growing species list. The interstate mycologists were so intent on their tasks that they failed to see the cryptically coloured Bassian Thrush, which hopped, then flew from our midst. We returned to the car in time to avoid the next bout of freezing rain and headed for the hotel and another meal of hearty pub food.

Financial support from the Central North and Launceston Field Naturalists, the Royal Botanic Gardens, Melbourne and Australian Geographic made this excursion possible without individuals having to incur out of pocket expenses. All time in the field was willingly donated to the cause of improving our knowledge of the incredible fungal diversity in this remarkable part of the world.

Page URL: <https://www.disjunctnaturalists.com/articles1/mycologists-in-paradise.htm>

[Back to top](#)

[Home](#)

[Why 'disjunct'?](#)

[Membership](#)

[CDs & Books](#)

[Contact Us](#)

[Articles](#)

[Acoustic Bird Monitoring](#)

[Walks & events](#)

[Links](#)