

Pembrokeshire Fungus Recording Network

Grassland fungi at Carew Castle SSSI

Jane Hodges (Ecologist, Pembrokeshire Coast National Park Authority) - September 2005

Carew Castle SSSI is of national/European importance for its bat populations, which have been the focus of attention over the past few years. The castle is surrounded by semi-improved neutral grassland which supports populations of several locally or regionally scarce flowering plants. Over the past 25 years or so, a considerable amount of biological recording has been carried out in the castle and castle ground, although until the autumn 2004, little, if any notice had been taken of fungi in the SSSI.

This changed in early November 2004, when an abundance of grassland fungi prompted further investigation. In common with other sites in Pembrokeshire, 2004 proved to be a bumper year for grassland fungi at Carew, and a minimum of 15 species of wax-caps, 4 species of fairy clubs and 2 of earth-tongues were discovered in November. Species recorded range from the relatively common meadow waxcap, *Hygrocybe pratensis*, and snowy waxcap, *H. virginea*, to the less frequently recorded crimson waxcap, *H. punicea* and citrine waxcap, *H. citrinovirens*. Some species such as scarlet waxcap, *H. coccinea*, occurred in profusion, with hundreds of individual caps visible in mid-November. Perhaps the "star" of the show was the UK BAP priority species pink ballerina, *H. calyptiformis*, with over 70 caps of this beautiful fungus recorded at Carew Castle in 2004.



The grassland at Carew Castle is an interesting habitat for grassland fungi. The site has been almost continuously occupied or used in some way since Romano-British times (ca. 2nd century AD) and the present castle dates back to the 11th century. During periods of occupation, the castle grounds (now grassland) were subject to very high levels of disturbance, nutrient enrichment and other modifications. The remains of animal housing can be seen today, as can the small quarries that were opened up to supply stone to the castle. The grounds also contained middens, where organic waste (of every kind) was dumped. These would have been cleared out periodically and the material spread on adjacent fields as fertiliser/soil conditioner. When the castle ceased to be permanently occupied in the 17th century, the grounds continued to be used for grazing. Today, the grassland is cut for hay and grazed by ponies (autumn/winter) and a small number of sheep. The overall appearance of the grassland is of a bright-green sward, dominated by coarse grasses, with stands of nettles in areas where animals have tended to congregate and in the vicinity of the remains of animal housing, which suggest that soil nutrients (eg phosphates) remain at quite high levels in places.

The discovery of wax-cap and other grassland fungi at Carew came fairly late-on in the fruiting season. Early-fruiting species may therefore have been overlooked in 2004, and I look forward to the new wax-cap season with anticipation.

My thanks are due to David Harries for his help and enthusiasm in the field and to Sam Bosanquet for identification of the earth-tongues and help with the separation of potentially confusing species of wax-caps.

Note on access: Carew Castle is managed by the Pembrokeshire Coast National Park Authority.

The castle and grounds are closed to the public between 31st October and Easter each year. Anyone wishing to visit the castle specifically to look for grassland fungi is asked to contact Jane Hodges at the Pembrokeshire Coast National Park offices, Llanion Park, Pembroke Dock (tel. no. 0845 345 7275) before visiting the site.

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