

Stinkhorns of the Grampians

August 2005

Of the many weird and wonderful members of the fungi world the Stinkhorns must rate highly. Most fungi produce fine dust like spores that are forcibly ejected into the air to be spread by air currents. Not so the Stinkhorns. Their spores are produced in a thick, glutinous, slime, which, when mature gives off an unpleasant smell. This smell has been variously described as “putrid”, “obnoxious”, “vile”, “disgusting” and “garbageous”.

Flies and some beetles are attracted to this smell, hoping for a meal of putrefying meat. When they leave, whether satisfied or not, they carry some of the fungal spores to be deposited elsewhere. Not only do Stinkhorns have this unusual way of spreading their spores but their growth process and bizarre shapes also mark them as something special.

All of the fruiting bodies come from an “egg” which is at, or just below, ground level. This “egg” has a tough, whitish membrane that encloses the developing body. When the skin ruptures the body emerges in its particular shape.

We have seen three kinds of Stinkhorn around the Grampians in recent years.

Cage or Basket Fungus is tightly folded into its egg. When released it springs into a spherical, hollow lattice, looking like a soccer ball with the panels kicked out. This action can take place within a few minutes and can be quite surprising to the discoverer. It is usually found in woodland, or in woodchips in garden beds, but has been seen in remnant native grasslands on roadsides.

Craypot Stinkhorn (or **Stinkypuss**) is one of the most oddly shaped and brightly coloured fungi. No need to say it smells just like stale cat’s urine. The fruiting body consists of 5 or 6 brilliant red wrinkled arms joined at the tips and at the base. They grow to a height of about 75 mm and can be found in springtime round winter-wet depressions, though they are not common.

Mutinus is our latest find. As far as we know it has no common name, but if it had it would doubtless have some phallic reference. The cylindrical body protrudes from the ruptured egg sac and has a well-developed opening at the tip, which is coated with the spore-bearing slime.

These Mutinus specimens were found on the slopes of Mt. Sturgeon in early August. Last year they also appeared in mid-winter. If the purpose of the evil smell is to attract blowflies, why emerge at the coldest time of the year? The answer to that may lie in the several holes in the ground that were once occupied by the Mutinus. It seems that some bird or, more likely, mammal finds them attractive. The smell may disguise a pleasant taste but none of us are willing to test that theory.

Photos:

The Cage or basket fungus – like a soccer ball with the panels kicked out.

The Craypot or Stinkypuss fungus with attendant blowflies – smells like stale cat's urine.

